

BRITAIN, POLAND AND THE
EASTERN FRONT, 1939

SOVIET AND EAST EUROPEAN STUDIES

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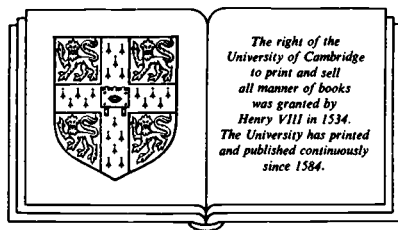
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ANITA PRAZMOWSKA



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Preface

When I was an undergraduate student at the School of History at the University of Birmingham I took a course, run by Professor J.A.S. Grenville, on British foreign policy in 1938–9. I was then struck by the one-sided interpretation which prevailed in British historical works on the effect of British policy on Europe prior to the outbreak of the war. The heated debate which surrounded the question of appeasement tended to confine the discussion on the British role in the years preceding the war to the analysis of Anglo-German relations. Subsequently during my research on Anglo-Polish relations in 1938–9 that impression was confirmed. I felt that the complexity of Britain's continental policy had not been fully analysed and where an effort had been made it still lacked an understanding of the reciprocal nature of foreign policy.

This book has been the result of the above considerations. In it I have tried to show how, far from setting the pace in Europe's response to German aggression, Britain like other states, was herself a victim of an inability to mount a major change of policy towards Germany. As I have been able to draw upon my knowledge of Polish sources to show the reciprocal nature of Anglo-Polish relations during 1939 I was thus able to exhibit the full extent of Britain's inability to build an eastern front based on Poland. The Anglo-Polish understanding of March 1939, which traditionally has been seen as the beginning of a new policy, on closer inspection is shown to be an attempt to respond to the German continental initiative. A close study of Polish sources shows the tenuous nature of British influence upon Poland during the period March–September 1939. It leads to a refutation of the suggestion that the British espousal of the Polish cause led directly to Poland rejecting German demands in Danzig and thus drew upon Poland the full wrath of a German attack.

During my research I have had access to British archives at the Public Records Office, Polish archives in the Archiwum Akt Nowych in Warsaw, state archives in Gdańsk and finally the collection of documents at the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London. Many a debt of gratitude remains undischarged. Mention must be made of those to Mr R. Knecht, Professor J.A.S. Grenville at the University of Birmingham, Professor R.F. Leslie at Queen Mary College, and Professor A. Garlicki at the University of Warsaw. Colleagues and personal friends encouraged me and have been unstinting in their willingness to read, comment and correct my drafts. Of those, I remain profoundly grateful to Margaret Morris and Brian Hamnett. But my deepest and most enduring debt of gratitude is to Jan Toporowski for his constant help and emotional support. Finally, Irene Scouller, who patiently typed and re-typed drafts, deserves credit for her part in this book.

Introduction

In 1968 the Public Records Office made available to historians British Cabinet papers relating to the years 1938 and 1939. This decision had renewed the debate on the extent of British responsibility for allowing Hitler to pursue his revisionist and aggressive policies in Europe. It has been asserted that the degree of British complicity, the logical consequences of appeasement, could be ascertained through the study of contemporary documents. The historical analysis of British involvement in the break up of Czechoslovakia has notably benefited from this development. It is therefore surprising to note that this has not been matched by an equally detailed analysis of the few months preceding the outbreak of the war, in particular the period from March till September 1939.

The assumption of an undertaking to aid Poland against German aggression on the 31 March has traditionally been seen as signalling a break in the foreign policy hitherto pursued by the British government. It is presumed, therefore, that the period from the end of March to the outbreak of the war is one of few new initiatives, in any case none which would contradict the assertion that in the closing days of March Britain had made a definite commitment to fight Germany.¹ Thus the British guarantee to Poland is frequently viewed in apocalyptic terms. In some interpretations it is portrayed as a supreme folly, a gesture that constituted a gauntlet thrown down to Hitler and one which he picked up at a time when Britain was unprepared for war.² By others, it is seen as a point at which Britain decided to oppose Germany and forge a new policy of challenging Hitler by offering a guarantee to a country which, it was known, would be the next object of German revisionism.³

In both these interpretations of Britain's reactions to German aggression in Central and Eastern Europe in 1938 and 1939, the British guarantee to Poland is seen through the prism of German actions in Europe, overlooking the traditional and long-term policy of successive British governments of disengagement from the affairs of Central and Eastern Europe. The latter perspective reveals the more complex origins of British appeasement as well as casting a more revealing light on Britain's inability to build up successfully an eastern front against Germany during the period from March to September 1939.

Throughout the First World War British politicians and the Foreign Office were deeply apprehensive of the consequences of the break up of the old empires, primarily the Austro-Hungarian, but also the Russian and the Ottoman Empires. The replacement of existing, however unstable, entities was going to pose new and unknown problems. Thus little support was given initially to Polish and Czechoslovak claims for support for their aspirations from the Entente powers. The collapse of the Russian partner precipitated new attitudes. Moreover, the Central Power's attempt to obtain Polish support, by recognising the right of the Poles to an independent state, forced the British and French to formulate new policies.⁴ Britain's main concern was the future fate of Germany, and subsequently also that of Russia. In the first case Britain opposed French schemes for weakening Germany by imposing a punitive peace. In the case of Russia, Britain's involvement in the Civil War was badly planned and half-hearted, resulting in troops being committed to the Russian war but, simultaneously, a reluctance to support Polish schemes for a war against the Bolsheviks.⁵ To Poland the consequence of that attitude was that Britain remained opposed to the incorporation of Danzig and Upper Silesia into Poland.⁶ But the subsequent Polish-Russian war of 1919-20 and the Polish-Czechoslovak crisis over Teschen appeared to substantiate fully Lloyd George's apprehensions that the new states would be the source of instability in that region.

It was France which, ostensibly, benefited from the creation of the new states in Central Eastern Europe. However, the importance of the Franco-Polish Alliance of 1921 and the Czechoslovak-French Alliance of 1924 should not be overestimated. Polish-Czechoslovak hostility retained its full potency during the whole of the inter-war period and prevented France from making any diplomatic use of her

agreements with both countries, whether to form an anti-German bloc or to conciliate potential Danubian conflicts.⁷

The British initiative in negotiating the Locarno Pact confirmed all that was apparent in British foreign policy towards Germany and Central and Eastern Europe as well as leading to the weakening of France's influence east of Germany. The substance of the Locarno treaties was such that Britain and France implicitly let Germany know that they accepted the possibility of the revision of Germany's eastern frontier while at the same time underlining the inviolability of her borders in the west.⁸

Whereas it is difficult to perceive any long-term British political plans towards Central Eastern Europe, an analysis of economic contacts is more revealing. In the first half of 1919 Britain lent her support to schemes for the creation of independent Baltic States. The Polish claim to the Baltic coast and region as areas of her exclusive interest were seen as going counter to British plans for increasing trade with those countries and subsequently also with the Soviet Union.⁹ On a general level, Britain opposed any power trying to monopolise trade with the Successor States. But during the 1930s these countries' attempts to restrict their trade with Germany and expand it with Britain evoked little response from the latter.

The onset of the world depression necessitated a revision of economic priorities. At the Ottawa conference in July 1932 Britain committed herself to trade with the imperial territories. The agricultural countries of Central Eastern Europe, most notably the Baltic States and Poland, were affected adversely by this decision.¹⁰ To the North Eastern European countries, Britain remained the most important market for their agricultural produce, a position which was altered by Germany's aggressive economic policy after 1934. Their preference for trading with Britain was nevertheless not considered to be of sufficient economic importance by the British Treasury and the Board of Trade. That attitude was maintained steadfastly in spite of the Foreign Office's disquiet at the expansion of Germany's political influence, which came in the wake of the spread of her economic dominance.

In 1936 the Foreign Office's urgings that clearance payments schemes should be established with Central East European states was rejected on the grounds that it conflicted with the government's determination not to make special arrangements with that region. This decision was aimed at protecting British agriculture.¹¹ The

Foreign Office did recognise that Britain was thus casting aside an opportunity to realise the political capital of those countries' apprehensions at their growing economic dependence on trade with Germany. But, both in political and economic terms, trade with Poland and the Baltic States was of little consequence to Britain. German expansion eastwards, be it economic or even political, was not viewed as undesirable, although British politicians had earlier strongly objected to the states east of Germany becoming an area of exclusive French influence.

Militarily too, Britain considered Central Eastern Europe to be of no direct significance. When the military activities of the First World War had ceased in Europe, British troops remained in various trouble spots of the empire and, in addition, Britain acquired new areas which brought with them the need for policing. This was particularly the case in Palestine. Britain's military resources remained severely stretched during the inter-war period and the defence of Europe was the first casualty of any plans for reducing or rescheduling expenditure on military matters.¹² Notwithstanding the Treasury's determination to control and limit spending on troops for the Continent, there also existed amongst British military chiefs a general dislike of the French and a consequent reluctance to plan joint action in Europe.¹³ This sentiment prevailed throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

During discussions in December 1937 the Cabinet reaffirmed its acceptance of the primary role of the army as being the defence of the empire. Thomas Inskip, Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, based his assumptions on Hore-Belisha's earlier statement that 'France no longer looked to Britain, in the event of war, to supply an expeditionary force on the scale hitherto proposed'.¹⁴ Thus, even on the eve of German action in Austria, and in the full knowledge of Germany's well publicised claim to the defence of Sudeten Germans, the British government was proceeding with the decrease of military commitments to the Continent. In any event, the only role envisaged for the British army on the Continent was the defence of Belgium, Holland and the northern coast of France. British unwillingness to send any troops to Central Eastern Europe or naval units to the Baltic or Black Seas was a foregone conclusion. In the absence of political commitments east of Germany, no plans were made for a reappraisal of this position throughout the inter-war period.

Historians studying the British government's reaction to the Austrian crisis of 1938 agree that developments there were considered to have been outside the scope of the mainstream of British foreign policy considerations. In his book *The Chamberlain Cabinet*, Ian Colvin notes that the annexation of Austria was an event with which the British Cabinet came to terms with admirable ease. German actions were considered to have been unnecessarily provocative and likely to threaten peace in Europe, but in essence, it was still hoped to continue with the long-term aim of reaching a colonial settlement with Germany, a plan which had earlier been put to the German government by the British.¹⁵

The Austrian crisis immediately brought to the fore the question of Czechoslovakia, a subject the British Cabinet proceeded to debate on the day following the Anschluss. Two issues preoccupied the minds of the British ministers. The most important was the fear lest France make a hasty decision to honour her obligation to Czechoslovakia and then draw Britain into a European war. The second concern was that of how to persuade the Czechs to yield to the German demand for the incorporation of the Sudeten Germans into Germany. On 14 March 1938 Chamberlain, addressing the Committee for Foreign Policy, asserted that he did not believe 'the assumption that when Germany had secured the hegemony of Central Europe, she would then pick a quarrel with ourselves'.¹⁶ Having persuaded the French government of Chautemps to distance itself from Czechoslovakia Britain took the reins into her own hands. Pressure was to be put on Czechoslovakia to show herself reasonable in the face of German demands. Keith Middlemas states in his book *Diplomacy of Illusion* that by the summer of 1938, the question was not that of whether to defend Czechoslovakia or not, but that of whether 'to warn Hitler off or to go to the extreme lengths of concession'.¹⁷

Both these crises and the British government's response illustrate the point stated earlier, that the British government was indifferent to the fate of Central Eastern Europe. A notable feature of both these crises is the fact that the merits of Germany's claims were on the whole not considered, nor was the legitimacy of Germany's actions.

But it was not a feeling of fatalism which caused British politicians to display indifference to the fate of Austria and Czechoslovakia. The main motive for British indifference to the consequences of German revisionism was the recognition of the fact that German

actions did not threaten British interests. Chamberlain's pre-occupation remained a general European and global settlement with Germany, in which case he was prepared to overlook the fate of minor European states as well as long-term French interests.

At the same time, the conclusion of an Anglo-Italian Agreement was high on the list of British foreign policy priorities. Italian acquiescence to the Anschluss did surprise British politicians. But in the absence of any major difference of opinion between the British and Italians over Austria, the Spanish Civil War remained the only live obstacle to, what British politicians hoped would become, good relations between the two Mediterranean powers, Britain and Italy.

Still one has to recognise that Britain's sudden involvement in German-Czechoslovak negotiations over the fate of the Sudeten Germans was a move that clearly went counter to traditional British policy not merely in Europe but particularly in Central Eastern Europe. Amongst a number of theories put forward by historians, two suggest opposing explanations. One by Simon Newman concentrates predominantly on the Munich conference and concludes on the granting of the guarantee to Poland. Simon Newman sees the British initiative in setting up the Munich conference as an attempt to stem German expansion eastwards. Concentrating on a study of economic developments, he concludes that the British initiative in German-Czechoslovak relations was the beginning of the turn in the British attitude towards German revisionism. According to Newman, Chamberlain tried to halt German aggression and since September 1938 sought means of cautioning Germany against continuing aggressive moves. This was to be achieved partly through the use of economic contracts and, when these failed, by a direct warning to Germany over the case of Poland in March 1939.¹⁸ The British commitment to Poland is thus seen in the new light as a final notice, where economic gestures had failed to deter Germany. Newman suggests, therefore, that during the period October 1938-March 1939 Britain sought means of defending Central East European states against German aggression.

The other theory on British-German relations in the 1930s is suggested by Andrew Crozier. In his article on the subject Crozier concentrates his attention on the period preceding the Munich conference. The core of his theory is that in 1936 the British Cabinet authorised a new, more systematic approach to Germany. Aban-

doning the previously piecemeal treatment of German actions which challenged the Versailles Treaty, it was decided to take the lead in initiating a review of German grievances in respect of the postwar settlement.¹⁹ Thus a comprehensive list of aims was presented by Eden according to which the Locarno Treaty was to be abandoned in favour of a more general arms limitation agreement. Furthermore, Germany's economic and political interest in Central and Eastern Europe would be recognised. According to Crozier, Britain was thus taking the initiative and hoping to control German revisionism.

The colonial question promised to be a good starting point for this British programme. Unfortunately, Germany did not respond to these approaches and proceeded with the Anschluss, thus presenting Britain, as the rest of Europe, with a *fait accompli*. Crozier thus sees the Munich agreement as Britain's last attempt at setting the pace and thus controlling German expansion, and as, in effect, a miscarriage of that policy. He views the Munich conference not as an isolated incident but, 'an aspect of a much wider whole, namely, the policy of trying to achieve a European and general settlement'.²⁰

A variation of this theory of British actions preceding the Munich conference is also suggested by Michael Newman.²¹ Newman asserts that Britain had, throughout the inter-war period, refused to take an active interest in the minutiae of Central and Eastern European politics. In the British view, the region's affairs only were of indirect importance to Great Britain. Michael Newman sees Britain as aiming exclusively for a four power detente including Britain, France, Germany and Italy, as the sole purpose of her European policy. If small power rivalries in the Danubian Basin were likely to impede this detente they should be resolved forthwith in order to facilitate the major aim of harmony between the four big European powers.²² Newman states that the advent of the Nazi government and its obvious aggressive intentions did not alter this basic principle of British foreign policy towards Central Europe. He asserts that:

Since the goal of four power agreements, completed with passive pragmatism in Central Europe, had been adopted because it apparently served Britain's world interests, there would inevitably be extremely powerful forces in favour of retaining this policy unless it could be proved that Nazi aggressiveness in Central Europe necessarily threatened Britain's major interests elsewhere. In fact these forces maintained their dominance throughout the period.²³

Finally, Michael Newman concludes by showing that German aggression towards Czechoslovakia, though considered undesirable, was never seen as requiring a major reappraisal of British goals towards Germany.

Both Andrew Crozier and Michael Newman lay great stress on the continuity of British foreign policy primarily towards Germany and also, as a result of that, towards the victims of German aggression. Michael Newman succinctly summarises this attitude by suggesting that Britain 'was not prepared to modify the traditional supposition that Central Europe was an area of minor importance unless and until it was absolutely convinced that Nazi expansion there would preface general expansion'.²⁴

In any event, the period from October 1938 until March 1939 was one of relative stability. Germany's immediate demands towards Czechoslovakia appeared to have been dealt with and no new areas of potential conflict appeared imminent. But in the same way that the Anschluss did not satiate Hitler's appetite, so the Munich agreement did not resolve the issue of German revisionism. Indeed, the whole Czechoslovak crisis gave proof of Hitler's determination to seek redress of all remaining outstanding German territorial grievances. Furthermore, it exhibited his ruthlessness in the pursuit of this aim. Not surprisingly, most European statesmen and politicians sought to anticipate Hitler's next move.

Outstanding claims to Polish territory, namely to the Free City of Danzig, came once more to the forefront of attention in the autumn of 1938. Indeed, the whole of Polish-German relations were closely observed, as most European politicians envisaged a number of possible conflicts between the two. Polish complicity in the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, while removing the Polish-Czechoslovak dispute over the Teschen region from the list of dangerous issues, immediately gave rise to a new potential Polish-German conflict over the Czech region of Bohumin, Frydek and Freistat. In addition, it was generally suspected that Germany was supporting Ukrainian irredentism, which was, amongst others, also directed against Poland.

But at that time Poland was not viewed with sympathy. Her policy of following an independent and what appeared at times to be a policy of extreme opportunism, endeared her to none of the other European powers. Both the French and the British realised that

Poland would not allow herself to be directed to the extent that Czechoslovakia had. The haughty and abrasive personality of Poland's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Colonel Joseph Beck, made him an unpopular figure in the League of Nations, in France and in Britain. In the autumn of 1938, although anticipating the possible development of a conflict between Germany and Poland, no British politician was prepared to champion the case of Poland, even if Britain were determined to oppose Germany.

Political developments in Central Eastern Europe throughout the inter-war period vindicated previous British feelings of disquiet and distaste at having to deal with the consequences of instability in that part of Europe. Poland, her internal and foreign policies, all provided an adequate rationale and excuse for disinterest in the squabbles of the Successor States. J. Maynard Keynes' comment on Poland as 'an economic impossibility with no industry but Jew-baiting'²⁵ exquisitely sarcastic as it is, did, to all intents and purposes, reflect the attitude of Liberal, Labour and particularly Conservative party circles.

Within one year of having obtained independence, Poland had embarked on a policy of aggression against the newly-established Bolshevik state. While Britain had made known her disapproval of Polish claims to the extension of the Polish border in the east beyond the Curzon line, the outbreak of the Polish-Russian war in 1920, drew Britain back into arbitration in that region. But what left a lasting impression in the minds of the French and British politicians was the manner in which the Polish government behaved when it first appealed for arbitration as a Polish defeat appeared to be imminent and then flouted the advice given when their strategic position improved. During the Spa conference in July 1920 Polish-Russian hostilities were discussed and, on British insistence, an attempt was made to commit Poland to a major border settlement.²⁶ But when in August 1920 Poland restarted a successful counter-offensive against the Bolsheviks, earlier British advice was scorned. By October, the Piłsudski government was once more letting it be known that Poland considered not merely Lithuania but also Estonia and Finland as areas of legitimate Polish interest. In October 1920 General Żeligowski occupied Vilnius in direct contravention of the British-French decision that it should belong to Lithuania. Though ostensibly this action had not been authorised by the Polish government,

in November the Polish Sejm approved the incorporation of the town and district into Poland, thus demonstrating that British advice and wishes would be ignored.

Soon after winning the war against the Bolsheviks, the Poles displayed a remarkable ability to ignore the national aspirations of the Lithuanian and Ukrainian population and proceeded to get involved in an acrimonious quarrel with their southern neighbour, Czechoslovakia. The Polish–Czechoslovak dispute over the Teschen region originated in the Czechoslovak occupation of the area in January 1919. An additional factor was the French support of Czechoslovakia which aimed at making the latter a pivotal point of French influence in Central Europe. Czechoslovakia was the only industrialised state in that region and it was considered advantageous by the French to support the development of Czechoslovak coal mining, in particular that of the rich coking coal, as well as steel production.²⁷ The result was that Polish–Czechoslovak relations remained strained throughout the inter-war period. Polish support for Slovak independence movements was reciprocated by Czechoslovak aid to Ukrainian nationalist organisations.

During the 1920s and 1930s Polish military leaders presumed that the next major war in which Poland would be involved, would be one with the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was viewed as Poland's major enemy and, until late 1938, the only aggressor against whom military plans had been prepared. The historical enmity existing between the two states was further encouraged by internal policy considerations. Political restrictions and a nationalist policy pursued by successive Polish governments against internal political opponents and national minorities tended to be justified by a need for vigilance. Anti-communism and anti-Semitism became the most obvious examples of these tendencies. Aspirations to the status of a major European power served to draw public attention away from economic problems and the suppression of democratic rights and focussed it on imperial claims and calls for an anti-Bolshevik crusade, which would extend Polish borders from the Baltic to the Black Sea.²⁸ As in the case of Czechoslovakia, Poland's relations with the Soviet Union remained bad throughout the inter-war period and only on a few occasions appeared to rise above the indifferent. In July 1932 Poland signed with the Soviet Union a Pact of Non-Aggression, a move motivated by the disquiet at the policies of the other major European powers, notably Britain and France, rather

than a change of attitude towards the Soviet Union. A deterioration in Polish–German relations had accentuated Poland's isolation and was an added impetus for the Polish government to respond favourably to approaches made by Maxim Litvinof, Soviet People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, in the autumn of 1931.²⁹

The 'Stresemann period', which is a phrase used to describe the *rapprochement* which characterised Anglo-French relations with Germany during the period 1925–9 placed Poland in a particularly weak position. The successful negotiations pursued by these powers caused France to temporarily eschew her eastern allies. France's attitude towards the Central East European states depended to a very large extent on the state of relations existing at the time between France and Britain on the one hand, and France and Germany on the other. French politicians tended to attach less significance to relations with Poland and Czechoslovakia in direct proportion to the improvement of relations with Britain and Germany. These changes of emphasis in France's foreign policy tended to reverberate strongly in Central Eastern Europe. Poland and Czechoslovakia both presumed that the Locarno Treaty opened the door to German revisionism eastwards in particular.³⁰ The result was that Poland's dictator Piłsudski initiated efforts to improve relations with Germany. Hitler proved himself to be more responsive to these moves than was Stresemann and in January 1934 Poland and Germany signed a Pact of Non-Aggression.

Contemporary commentators and subsequent historians tended to castigate Poland for having negotiated with Germany in 1934, but at the time the treaty appeared to be a very advantageous one to Poland. The Poles had concluded that France, under what was presumed to be British tutelage, was a very unreliable partner. Poland's standing in Europe appeared to be weakening. The entry of Germany into the League of Nations in 1926 and the success of Stresemann's policies accentuated Poland's weakness as she did not have a strong European partner to support her in her dealings with Germany. At the same time the Soviet Union's status in Europe appeared to be improving. In spite of their initial reluctance to perceive the Bolshevik state as anything but a transient phenomenon, both France and Britain in due course established political relations with it and Poland was given little encouragement in her anti-Soviet designs. In considering the advantages to be gained from improving Poland's relations with Germany, Piłsudski's government also took

into account Poland's economic position. Foreign capital appeared to have been reluctant to invest in a country likely to be the object of German aggression. Poland's difficulties during the depression were increased by the flight of short-term capital and the government's inability to obtain further loans. It has therefore been suggested that the Polish government sought detente with Germany in the 1930s in order to expand Polish-German trade as well as to facilitate negotiations in international markets.³¹

In Poland the Polish-German agreement was seen as a success confirming Poland's big power status in Europe. Immediate benefits were gained from the revival of international trade and the decrease of tension in the Free City of Danzig. It has also been suggested that Pilsudski hoped that the agreement would lead to future joint plans for a war against the Soviet Union and the restoration of eighteenth-century Polish borders.³² Thus in 1934, Poland made the fundamental assumption of German non-belligerence. This was a view that was momentous in its implications, and as a consequence of which Polish foreign policy tended towards approving German revisionist claims in Central Eastern Europe without securing for Poland compensation either in strategic or political terms.

Poland's distrust of the French was accentuated by a belief that France was increasingly succumbing to British influence. In addition to experiencing British opposition to Polish territorial claims during the Versailles conference, the Poles had dealings with the British over the Free City of Danzig. Britain was one of the members of the League Commission on Danzig and as Rapporteurs the British were seen as espousing the German side.

The case of Danzig was a complex one. The compromise solution of it becoming a Free City, with its own elected governing body, constitution and currency but remaining as part of Poland's customs arrangement was one which satisfied neither the Poles nor the Germans. The League of Nations guaranteed the status of the Free City but was clearly not in a position to protect it. The League High Commissioner in the city was appointed to act as mediator between the Polish government and the Senate and thus incurred the hostility of the Poles who saw him as defending German rights. The situation was rendered more difficult when, in May 1933, the National Socialists won a majority in the Senate and the city authorities became unequivocally committed to representing Hitler's aims in the city.³³ Thus Danzig and the commitment to its status became an

embarrassment to the British, a feeling they neither denied nor concealed.

The protection of the status of the Free City was the only obligation which Britain retained in Central Eastern Europe, albeit an indirect one, but one which she persistently tried to dispose of throughout the 1930s. Eden's scheme for a comprehensive settlement with Germany, which was approved in 1936 and which would have included the question of colonies and the inclusion of all Germans in Germany, had failed.³⁴ But British politicians remained consistent in letting Hitler know that they sought an opportunity to be relieved of the League obligations in the Free City. During a visit to the Berlin Hunting Exhibition, November 1937 Halifax restated Britain's disinterest in Eastern Europe. On assuming the post of Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Halifax tried to encourage the Poles to allow the League to withdraw from Danzig. Thus on 24 May 1938, the League Commissioner, Professor Carl Burckhardt, reported to Marian Chodacki, the Polish Commissioner, that Halifax had stated that if the Senate would introduce para-Nuremberg race law, the League would no longer wish to remain in the city. Burckhardt also repeated that he felt that the French were increasingly toeing the British line on Danzig.³⁵ In his subsequent report, Chodacki recorded that Burckhardt had confirmed his sense 'that the British side was growing impatient with the state of affairs in Danzig as this prejudiced Britain's talks with the Reich and created a unpleasant atmosphere in the House of Commons, while of course, the Danzig issue was a matter of total indifference to the British'.³⁶

Reporting on the visit of the Danzig Gauleiter, Forster, to Britain in July 1938, the Polish Embassy in London was able to paint a better picture of the British government's attitude towards the issue. Sir Alexander Cadogan, the Permanent Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office, was quoted as assuring the Poles that he had warned Forster against taking any illegal action to change the status of the city. But Stevenson of the League Department of the Foreign Office was less restrained and admitted that in his conversation with Forster 'he took the opportunity to tell him that the British government would view with pleasure the possibility of Poland and Germany reaching an agreement over Danzig'. Stevenson's confidences led the Poles to assume that what had really been implied to Forster was that as long as the Senate retained a cloak of legality, the British would not object.³⁷ Thus British, but also French, attitudes

towards Poland's rights in the Free City were being analysed by the Poles not in isolation, but in relation to the whole of French and British policies towards Poland. The Poles nurtured a chronic suspicion that Danzig was to be a mere pawn which the democracies were prepared to concede to Germany in a major European game.³⁸

The man whose name was associated with Poland's claims to big powers status in Europe is Colonel Joseph Beck, who had been the Polish Minister for Foreign Affairs since November 1932. His main aim was to assert Polish independence between her two big neighbours, which he claimed to be maintaining by establishing equally good, though distant, relations with both the Soviet Union and Germany.

Since 1931 the Poles had diligently pursued the Third Europe policy. This was ostensibly a policy of building a bloc of states independent of big power tutelage with Poland as the rallying point for the smaller states of Central and South Eastern Europe. At its most grandiose the plan was to unite the states of the Baltic and the Balkans together. At its more modest it meant establishing some coherent policy between the Baltic States, Poland, Hungary, Rumania and Yugoslavia. Piłsudski and later Beck tried to emphasise the non-ideological nature of the proposal but the idea had clear political connotations. There was no natural political unity of interest amongst the states of Central and South Eastern Europe. They were disunited by old and more recent grievances. Polish-Lithuanian enmity and Rumanian and Yugoslav apprehensions about Hungary were too strong to be overcome. Anti-communism and, to a certain extent, anxiety about big power politics could be the only, albeit at times a very tenuous, unifying ideology.³⁹

Although the aim of Poland's foreign policy initiative was to eliminate conflicts in Central and South Eastern Europe, the complex hostilities in the region proved to be insurmountable. Thus Poland had to consider how to satisfy both Hungarian and Rumanian revisionist aims. The break up of Czechoslovakia appeared to offer this opportunity. But neither Yugoslavia nor Rumania were willing to encourage Hungarian revisionism. While not prepared to defend Czechoslovakia they most certainly did not want to see Hungary return to a position of importance.⁴⁰ In addition, when trying to set the pace of territorial readjustments in Central and South Eastern Europe, Poland was coming into conflict with German intentions.

Poland hoped to strengthen her position by setting the pace of a new territorial division at the expense of Czechoslovakia. Ironically that very process could only take place in the wake of German aggressive demands towards Czechoslovakia. Thus Beck hoped to counteract the spread of German political influence in Central and South Eastern Europe by forging unity between the states of that region. But in pursuing this very policy Poland was having to co-operate with Germany and thus herself became dependent on German support.

The desire to benefit from any German attack on Czechoslovakia was openly discussed by Poland's rulers in early 1938. Jan Szembek, the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, records a conversation he witnessed between the Minister for Defence, Marshal Śmigły-Rydz, and the President, Sławoj-Skłodowski, on 12 March 1938. Assuming that neither Britain nor France were likely to defend Czechoslovakia Śmigły-Rydz stressed that Poland should ensure that her neutrality in relation to Germany's proposed action in Czechoslovakia should be offered only at a price, in this case 'tangible benefits in Danzig'.⁴¹ Poland's co-operation with Germany in the Czechoslovak crisis had become clearly defined after the tension of May 1938.

According to Marian Wojciechowski, Beck had decided in May that the western democracies and the Soviet Union were likely to remain passive in the face of German aggression. Therefore, he felt safe in making a decision to co-operate with Germany fully, but only on the assumption that Germany would take the initiative.⁴² Thus, while still maintaining that Poland was not directly involved in the crisis, it became necessary for the Poles to define their objectives. Joseph Lipski, the Polish Ambassador to Berlin, believed that he had received a veiled invitation from the Nazi leaders to present Polish demands during two discussions he had had with Goering in August. The first took place on 11 August and the second, more precise in its content, on 24 August.

During the first conversation, Goering suggested that the moment was opportune for discussing 'the possibility of Polish-German *rapprochement* in certain fields'.⁴³ During the subsequent meeting Lipski, who had in the meantime received detailed instructions from Warsaw, was quite specific as to what Poland sought as a price for co-operation with Germany.⁴⁴ Hinting heavily that 'we also do not believe the present Czech creation can exist any longer' Lipski defined Poland's aims towards Czechoslovakia's territory as the granting of autonomy to Slovakia and the division of the district of

Sub-Carpatho-Ruthenia between Poland and Hungary. Furthermore, Lipski stressed the need for an improvement in relations over Danzig. Goering appeared to accept these points and added that Germany was prepared to extend the Polish-German agreement for an additional twenty-five years and to renounce all claims to Polish territory.

Polish-German relations appeared to have reached a high point in August 1938 and Beck was clearly strongly impressed by what he believed to have been a Polish victory.⁴⁵ But this position was a temporary one. It altered rapidly as a result of Chamberlain's initiative in visiting Hitler in Berchtesgaden on 14 September. Poland's ostensible neutrality, but in fact direct commitment to Germany during the latter stages of the Czechoslovak crisis, was of consequence only so long as Hitler had doubts about the possible reaction of the western powers. Chamberlain's conciliatory attitude towards German claims in the Sudeten region robbed Poland of her temporarily strong bargaining position.

Thus, when Lipski, acting on instructions received from Beck, saw Hitler on 20 September he found the Nazi leader still under the impression of his meeting with Chamberlain.⁴⁶ Hitler had received an intimation that his demands for the incorporation of the Sudetenland into Germany were going to be accepted by the British. Beck's instructions to Lipski were therefore hopelessly out of date. In these the Polish Minister for Foreign Affairs informed his ambassador that he should once more reiterate that Poland had rejected proposals to join in international intervention against any German attack against Czechoslovakia, that Poland's direct claims to Czechoslovak territory were restricted to the Teschen Silesia region, and furthermore that Poland remained committed to an anti-Soviet policy.⁴⁷ During the ensuing interview with Hitler, Lipski was encouraged to form the impression that Germany was sympathetic to Polish claims towards Czechoslovakia and would subsequently support Poland in her demands for colonies and the resolution of her Jewish problems.⁴⁸

On 27 September, knowing already of the Godesberg Meeting, the Polish government demanded that Czechoslovakia cede to Poland territory inhabited by a Polish minority. This was followed by another note to the Czechoslovak government dated 20 September which demanded the immediate cession of detailed areas to Poland.

This note was sent in the full knowledge of the resolution of the Munich conference, at which Polish and Hungarian territorial claims on Czechoslovakia were acknowledged. Marian Wojciechowski suggests that, parallel with a detestation of the principle of the Four Power Pact, which the Munich conference resurrected, Beck was reacting against Poland's demands being made conditional on German support. This was also an attempt to obtain a strategic advantage in relation to Germany, which the establishment of a frontier with Hungary would give Poland, an aim which Poland failed to realise at the time of the Munich conference.⁴⁹

By the end of October, Germany was no longer seeking Polish co-operation, since Hitler had been able to demonstrate that neither France nor Britain would oppose Germany and would in fact facilitate the satisfaction of Germany's revisionist claims. Poland's co-operation was of no significance and Hitler would now view the Polish aspiration to mediate in the Czechoslovak–Hungarian and the Rumanian–Hungarian conflicts as an attempt to establish Polish influence in that region; influence which could only be anti-German in its ultimate aim.

On 31 October 1938 in a conversation with the Polish ambassador to Berlin, Ribbentrop presented a comprehensive plan for a general revision and settlement of Polish–German relations.⁵⁰ Poland was to be given a frontier guarantee and the Polish–German Agreement of 1934 was to be extended by twenty-five years. On other issues dear to the hearts of Poland's military rulers, namely the emigration of Jews from Polish territory, colonial claims and support for Poland's anti-Soviet policy, Poland was also given the backing of the German government. In return Ribbentrop suggested that the Free City of Danzig be incorporated in the Reich and an extra-territorial link with Germany be built across Polish territory. The apparent reasonableness of these demands marked in fact an end to Polish–German collaboration which had been based, as far as Beck assumed, on an equal footing. Indeed, when analysed in isolation, the German proposals appeared to have offered Poland tangible benefits. But looked at from the perspective of Polish–German relations as they developed in 1938, in particular during the Czechoslovak crisis, the Ribbentrop initiative signalled a dramatic departure from the style of negotiations and exchanges hitherto pursued by the Nazi leaders towards Poland. The German proposal

clearly and unambiguously transgressed upon an issue which both the Poles and the Germans appreciated to be a key point in their relationship, namely the question of the city of Danzig.

The Polish response, communicated to the Germans on 31 October addressed itself predominantly to this point.⁵¹ Beck instructed his Ambassador in Berlin to state that in view of the fact that the weakening position of the League of Nations was likely to increase tension in the city, 'the Polish government proposes the replacement of the League of Nations guarantees and its prerogatives by a bilateral Polish-German agreement. This agreement should guarantee the existence of the Free City of Danzig so as to assure freedom of national and cultural life to its German minority and also should guarantee all Polish rights.' Poland and Germany had never appeared so far apart since the signing of the Polish-German agreement in 1934.

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The legacy of the Munich conference

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The crisis over Czechoslovakia appeared to have been resolved at the Munich conference, and thus it ceased being an area of British concern. But during the months following the conference and preceding the crisis of March 1939 the British government attempted to regain the initiative in European affairs, notably in relation to Italy and Germany. A noticeable feature of Britain's foreign policy at that time, indeed during the whole of 1939, is its high degree of continuity. Changes did take place and reappraisals were made of both long and short-term British objectives. These were nevertheless usually initiated as a result of a particular crisis or emergency, notably the Rumanian and Polish crises in March 1939 and the subsequent Danzig one in August. In any case the period from September to December 1938 saw few changes in British foreign policy, over which a relative feeling of complacency prevailed.

Chamberlain believed that the Munich conference decisions did offer some basis for European peace. In particular, he saw the Anglo-German Agreement, to which he obtained Hitler's signature during the conference, as a diplomatic success. After the conclusion of the Czechoslovak crisis Chamberlain, supported by Halifax, proceeded to seek the resolution of what he saw as the other outstanding problem in his European policy. This was the need for an improvement in Anglo-Italian relations.

The end of the Czechoslovak crisis did not preclude the possibility of Britain, once more, being drawn into European affairs. Lacking a direct interest either in the fate of Central Eastern Europe or German expansion in that direction, Britain remained in a position whereby she could choose either to become involved in developments east of Germany or to ignore them. Unless Britain either

totally dissociated herself from France and continental affairs or gave decisive support to France, which could have led to France declaring her disengagement from Central Eastern Europe, Britain could again be drawn indirectly into dangerous continental conflicts. Chamberlain's government was not prepared to entertain either of these alternatives and indeed chose a third policy alternative, that of an 'honest broker' in relation to Italian grievances. This attitude, while having no direct bearing on Germany's revisionist policies in Central Eastern Europe, cast a shadow over Franco-British relations and led to France's insistence on retaining her agreements with Poland and the Soviet Union.

Events in Central Eastern Europe did attract a certain amount of attention throughout the winter of 1938/9. Disinterested, but not wishing to be ill-informed, the British government closely observed German moves. The logical conclusion of this attitude was that the Cabinet expressed an interest only in issues likely to cause a conflict between Germany and another state, or else ones which could conceivably be seen by France as threatening her security. In the early months of 1939 the number of potential flash points increased and became increasingly confined to the same protagonists namely, Poland and Germany. This caused the British government to express a certain amount of concern. Nevertheless, on no account did it cause a change of policy and Britain continued to approach each crisis in isolation from the major question of Germany's aims in Europe.

A clear indication of the British government's consistency in its approach to East and Central European affairs is shown in the European Appreciation for 1939-40 presented by the Committee of Imperial Defence in February 1939.¹ The appreciation numbering ninety pages confined only one page to the analysis of the eastern theatre. The most likely development envisaged was that of Britain and France being involved in war with Germany and Italy because of further German aggression in Eastern Europe. It was automatically assumed that Germany would be involved in a war on two fronts as a result of Soviet intervention. It was admitted that 'we could give no effective direct assistance to Poland, Czechoslovakia or Hungary. With a hostile Italy, Yugoslavia would be beyond our help, and with Turkey neutral, we could not reach Rumania.' But the crucial admission of disinterest lies in the statement that in the event of a major German attack in the east, British action would be limited to sup-

porting France. Thus, it was concluded that 'a proportion of the effort of the British air striking force might be devoted to assisting the French Air Force to attack those objectives most likely to contribute to the success of the land operations, subject always to the consideration that it would not be in our interest to initiate attack which might be interpreted as being directed against the civil population'. Here lies a clear admission that Britain was not proposing to become involved directly in a war in the east and was heavily qualifying her involvement in the west.

It has been suggested that it was in the economic sphere that Britain demonstrated her objection to the expansion of German dominance of Central and South Eastern Europe. After Munich increased efforts were made to examine opportunities to increase economic contacts between British trading companies and those countries which were held to be in danger of becoming German economic satellites.² But in the economic sphere, as in the political, the evidence is fragmentary, and by no means supports the view that these efforts were a part of a grand strategy culminating in the British guarantees to Poland and Rumania in the spring.

Throughout the autumn of 1938 and the spring of 1939, Britain made several approaches to the Germans suggesting that she would be prepared to recognise Central and South Eastern Europe as a sphere of German economic expansion.³ These approaches were made at the same time as Chamberlain approved the work of the Interdepartmental Committee on South Eastern Europe, set up in May 1938 with the aim of examining the possibility of extending British influence into that region. The committee arose out of an earlier recognition that German economic and commercial influence had been extending and was leading to political dependence of the states in South Eastern Europe on Germany. At the same time most of the Central and South Eastern states let it be known that they would prefer to retain economic independence and sought British credits and loans.⁴ Ultimately the committee confined itself to the question of government economic assistance.

The Interdepartmental Committee's report, when presented in November, recognised that Central and South Eastern Europe was not an area of economic interest to British traders. Since these countries were primarily agricultural producers, imports from them would conflict with existing protection for British agriculture. Lack of foreign currency reserves in these countries further restricted

trade with them. The obstacles appeared insurmountable unless the government was prepared to 'set up organisations to foster trade with South Eastern Europe on the same lines as Germany'.⁵ The decision required was clearly a political one and only government action on these lines could alter the existing situation. In December, therefore, the Export Credits Guarantee Act was amended to provide for credits to be made available for political purposes. The sum envisaged was paltry, £10 million, and clearly could not have been the beginning of a major campaign of economic assistance with the aim of retaining British influence in the face of aggressive German economic penetration of that region. The feeble nature of these moves confirm the suggestion that Britain viewed the area as only indirectly concerning her. Britain had always disapproved of any part of Europe being monopolised by one power. At the same time there was a feeling that recognition of German economic interest in Central and South Eastern Europe could be used as a bargaining point in return for a German commitment to a European peace. Britain would thereby be giving way on an issue of little consequence to her and obtaining in return an important assurance from Germany which it was the major aim of British foreign policy to achieve.

French, British and Italian acquiescence to the secession of the Sudeten region was accompanied by an agreement that Polish and Hungarian claims on Czechoslovakia too should be satisfied. Polish and Hungarian relations with Germany were observed by the British Foreign Office with a certain amount of concern especially since it was feared that some aspects of these claims could be perceived by Germany as being anti-German. Poland and Hungary sought the separation of Slovakia from the Czechoslovak state and the incorporation of Sub-Carpatho-Ruthenia into Hungary. Poland hoped by this action to obtain a common border with Hungary but in particular sought the incorporation of a region inhabited by a volatile Ukrainian population into the borders of a friendly state. The Polish government had been for some time aware of German support for Ukrainian separatist movements, movements which were to a large extent anti-Polish.

The Foreign Office, on the whole, assumed that Germany opposed these Polish and Hungarian plans. As Polish, Hungarian and German policies towards Czechoslovakia appeared to be heading for direct confrontation, this caused Roger Makins of the Foreign

Office Central Department to comment prophetically on 9 October: 'One thing at least seems clear: whether Beck stays and Poland pursues her present policy, or whether Beck goes and Poland either risks a war with Germany or remains a faithful vassal to her, we should be well advised to avoid commitments in Poland.'⁶

The suspicions of the Foreign Office were soon confirmed by reports from Berlin on 22 October,⁷ and from Italy on 29 October.⁸ In addition the Rumanian government, whose consent was vital if Hungary was to proceed with her claims on Czech territory, had let the British know on 21 October that they did not support Beck's plans for a territorial division independent of German actions.⁹ The major fear expressed by the British was that a conflict would break out over the Ukrainian region in which not merely Germany would be involved, but more importantly, into which the Soviet Union too would be drawn. The definition of an ostensibly autonomous Ukrainian region could clearly be seen as the first step in the setting up of a Ukrainian puppet state. The Soviet Union was unlikely to tolerate such a creation, while Germany was opposed to the division of that region between Poland and Hungary. In an unusual departure from routine topics, the Cabinet briefly discussed the possibility of a conflict breaking out in the region inhabited by the Ukrainian population. But its concern was not with the minutiae of the region's complexities. Chamberlain stated clearly: 'that our attitude would be governed largely by the fact that we did not wish to see France drawn into a war with Germany on account of some quarrel between Russia and Germany with the result that we should be drawn into war in France's wake'.¹⁰

As stated, Chamberlain's government viewed continental conflicts from the point of view of British support for French policies there. While recognising the above it is notable that the very same government displayed a very cavalier attitude towards the French. Italy remained the most important object of British foreign policy initiatives in the closing weeks of 1938 and the winter of 1939.¹¹ The appeasement of Italy nevertheless did carry the risk of alienating France. This was a risk, whose magnitude Chamberlain did not fully consider at the time. His visit to Paris on 24 November was a failure as it confirmed French suspicions that Britain was not interested in supporting France. The effect of this was compounded when, after Chamberlain's and Halifax's visit to Rome in January 1938 Franco-Italian relations deteriorated further. Nor were Chamberlain's

hopes for cultivating Mussolini as the statesman who could be counted upon to 'control' Hitler realised. Throughout Chamberlain's Rome visit Mussolini remained steadfastly loyal to Hitler.¹²

With hindsight it can be said that Chamberlain's efforts in the winter of 1938–9 were doomed. He considered himself to be in a position to offer Italy further colonial revision, acquiescence to her actions in Spain and support, in order to facilitate an improvement in Italian relations with France. In reality Mussolini knew that he had the first two of Chamberlain's cards and was presently steering towards direct confrontation with France. Since November an orchestrated campaign of claims to Nice, Corsica and the Djibouti railway line was conducted by the Italian government. By failing to take account of the French change of mood the British politicians showed themselves singularly indifferent to the possibility of war breaking out in Europe.

Having abandoned Czechoslovakia to German demands Britain in fact forfeited the opportunity to create an eastern front against Germany. This idea was clearly not within the scope of the possible alternatives considered by Britain in 1938. But this had been one of the axioms of French policy towards Germany, the other being the defence of her own sovereignty from behind the Maginot Line. Although France's relations with her two allies, Poland and Czechoslovakia, and her patronage over the Little Entente never did lead to the creation of political unity in that region, it was nevertheless the only set of agreements existing between one of the major European states and the Successor States.

However, France's *Ostpolitik* lay in shreds after the Munich conference. During the Czechoslovak imbroglio France had abandoned the more stable of her eastern partners and furthermore removed the Soviet Union from having a say in the fate of Central Eastern Europe. France's reputation and prestige, which was already weak amongst the small states, was finally destroyed. French politicians now sought means of replacing their eastern policy with more binding commitments from Britain. In November and December 1938 the French government made demands for increased military co-operation and political support against Italy.¹³ Neither was forthcoming from the British.

During the period from October 1938 to March 1939, France appeared to have been following several contradictory lines of policy. These contradictions undoubtedly arose from a lack of infor-

mation concerning Germany's next move but also from the absence of a noticeable improvement in Anglo-French relations. Much ambiguity surrounded the Anglo-French guarantee to the dismembered Czechoslovak state, which was one of the matters requiring completion after the Munich conference. At the conference Britain and France committed themselves to the guaranteeing of Czechoslovak security jointly with Italy and Germany. This guarantee was to be concluded once all territorial claims to Czechoslovak territory had been satisfied. But the British government was not keen to take the initiative even if technically by the end of November both Hungarian and Polish claims had been dealt with.

During his visit to Paris on 24 November 1938, Chamberlain suggested to the French a more general or, in other words, vague, guarantee.¹⁴ Having prevented the outbreak of a European war as a result of the Czechoslovak crisis the British government did not want to be involved if a new confrontation emerged. Enquiries directed initially to Rome and in February to Berlin confirmed a general unwillingness on the part of Germany and Italy to see the territory of post-Munich Czechoslovakia guaranteed by new international commitments. Nor were French politicians prepared to take the lead in the formation of new anti-German blocs. Although Bonnet and his colleagues felt a certain amount of disquiet at allowing the Czech guarantee to lapse, they nevertheless looked to Britain to confirm the need for it.¹⁵ Finally, like Britain, France took her cue from Germany and allowed the matter to remain unrealised. At the time of Germany's march into Prague, the Four Power agreement to Czechoslovakia had not progressed beyond the vague stage at which it had been left at the Munich conference.

But France's attitude to Czechoslovakia has to be viewed in conjunction with that which she assumed towards her other eastern ally, namely Poland. Two lines of policy appear to have been followed by the French government in relation to Poland in the weeks following the Munich conference. On the one hand, Bonnet, in accordance with proposals put to him by the French Ambassador to Poland, Leon Noël, and with the consent of General Maurice Gamelin, French Chief of Staff, sought to re-negotiate the Polish-French alliance during November.¹⁶ It was proposed to strip the alliance of its binding character and change it from a political alliance with a military convention to a simple friendship agreement not obliging either side to act in the event of an attack on either of the signatories.

At the same time France sought to improve her position in Europe by establishing direct relations with Germany. This was crowned by the signing of the Franco-German declaration in December 1938. During Ribbentrop's visit to Paris, Bonnet stressed the inviolability of France's imperial possessions. Since an equally unequivocal statement was not made concerning France's interests in Central and Eastern Europe, it was not merely the Germans who presumed that France was voicing disinterest in that region.

These political gestures were not followed up by decisive actions. Early in January, Bonnet had assured the British Ambassador in Paris, Phipps, that he still sought the relaxation of the Polish-French and Soviet-French agreements, but was encountering strong opposition from both Poland and the Soviet Union.¹⁷ Nevertheless, on 26 January 1939 Bonnet stated to the Chamber of Deputies that France was determined to stand by her agreements with Poland and the Soviet Union.¹⁸

In the economic sphere France's indecision in her relations with the East European states was even more apparent. At the same time as assurances of disinterest were being made to Germany in the winter of 1938/9, France tried not merely to maintain but also to strengthen her economic contacts with Rumania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. Attempts were made to increase imports from these countries and new agreements were negotiated. These moves were not sufficient in themselves to stem the growth of German economic expansion into those areas.¹⁹ But it was notable that they were being pursued simultaneously with political moves to dissociate France from Eastern Europe. At the same time as Bonnet was publicly pronouncing his dislike of the Polish-French alliance, France paid 95 million francs to Poland, as the next instalment of payments under the Rambouillet Agreement. Similarly, though unwilling to offer a guarantee to Czechoslovakia independently of Britain, the French government tried to place extensive orders for munitions with the Skoda works in the winter of 1938/9.²⁰

Bonnet's unwillingness to go beyond rhetoric in dissociating France from her Eastern alliances can be explained in several ways. His policy of disengaging France from Eastern Europe came under violent attack from the Committee for Foreign Affairs of the Chamber of Deputies in December and January. Predictably he was attacked by deputies from the left but they were joined by those from the right.²¹ Italian belligerence in particular caused disquiet and led to

accusations that Bonnet had endangered national security in trying to loosen treaties which could help France in the event of a German–Italian attack.

On 8 March, Sir Howard Kennard, British Ambassador to Poland, reported a conversation with Noël who informed him that in spite of the Polish–French alliance being operative only in the event of a German or Soviet attack, if this happened he expected ‘that, M Beck would immediately tell (Noël) that the alliance did operate if France were attacked by Italy alone’.²² By February and early March, French politicians were publicly re-emphasising the importance of France’s alliance with Poland and the Soviet Union. Beck had been known to consider Poland’s friendship with Italy to be based on a tacit but shared understanding that neither favoured German expansion into Central and South Eastern Europe. It is doubtful therefore if Poland had any intention to help France in the event of an attack on the latter by Italy alone. In fact this conviction of a Polish–Italian understanding was held firmly by the Poles well into 1940, when Sikorski’s government refused to commit itself to action against Italy. In any event France doubted that Italy would have acted without German support. But her apprehensions about Italy and the possibility of Italian aggression are equally important in explaining her attitude towards Britain.

With Poland, as had happened with Czechoslovakia, Britain saw the next likely crisis in Eastern Europe as one not involving her directly, but as one which would originate in France’s involvement in the defence of her eastern ally. Commenting on Ribbentrop’s visit to Paris in December William Strang, Assistant Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office minuted:

The matter is of some importance to us. On the one hand if Germany pursues her aim in Eastern Europe without interference from France, she may ultimately make herself so strong that the security of France and Great Britain may be under imminent menace. On the other hand if France shows signs of intervening against Germany under her Treaties with Poland and the Soviet Union, we should be placed in the same position as in the Czechoslovak case this year, i.e. if France’s security were threatened as a result of her action, we might have to intervene in her support.²³

But if France was to be induced to abandon involvement in Eastern Europe she would require a compensation in the form of increased British commitment to her own security. Yet January and February 1939 were particularly inauspicious months in Anglo–French

relations. In February came reports of a possible German attack on Holland and Belgium. As Chamberlain was forced to recognise the need for a declaration to fight if this was to happen, it was noted by the Foreign Office that France might refuse to act against Germany unless she was given a British commitment to the opening of staff talks, an increase in the expeditionary force and, finally, guarantees to defend France against Italy. As a result of Foreign Office pressure guarantees were given to France on 6 February. Halifax too had come to disagree strongly with Chamberlain's view of Italy's role in European politics. Nevertheless, Chamberlain remained conciliatory towards Italy, an attitude he maintained steadfastly and this continued to cause the French deep apprehensions.²⁴

In line with the British government's lack of concern for developments east of Germany, other than those which might sour Anglo-German relations or alternatively those which might force Britain to give her support to a French dispute with Germany, the government did not show further interest in developments in that region. The Foreign Office did recognise that Poland could be the next country likely to be involved in a conflict with Germany. Indeed, there were a number of outstanding issues which Germany was most likely to seek to revive. Germany's determination to recover Danzig, the Poznan region and the Corridor were claims which the Weimar Republic, even during the most conciliatory period under Stresemann, never abandoned. Since the signing of the German-Polish Non-Aggression Treaty in 1934 Germany had taken care not to allow these grievances to sour relations with Poland, but their substance was never abandoned.

Within the British government, Polish objectives, never a vital subject in British politics, were discussed only in specialist circles of the Foreign Office. Neither during the autumn of 1938 nor during early spring 1939 were they the subject of Cabinet debates. The heads of Foreign Office departments initially expressed fury at Beck's actions during the Czechoslovak crisis. On the margin of a report from Kennard on 4 October, William Malkin, the Foreign Office's legal adviser, commented on Beck:

He is a menace, perhaps only second to Herr von Ribbentrop . . . the time has therefore come when we should try to get rid of him. There is not much that we could do directly but we could at least see to it that no further credits are granted to Poland so long as her foreign policy runs counter to our wishes.²⁵

Kennard, however, prevailed upon the Foreign Office to be somewhat more analytical of Poland's policies. Clearly Poland was acting in defence of her own interests and British actions had not appeared to offer tangible benefits to Poland. Nor was the British Ambassador to Poland quite clear as to what were British objectives in relation to Poland. He admitted to being quite puzzled and appealed to the Foreign Office for clarification of several key questions:

Does the Foreign Office feel that the east of Europe is so far away that it is better to leave the settlement to Germany and Italy in the hope that they will achieve some sort of balance? Does the Foreign Office feel that a certain neutral bloc might, until Hungary falls into the German maw be of some use? Does the Foreign Office feel that Poland is worth strengthening or not?²⁶

These questions led to the most extensive discussion of Poland's position in British foreign policies, focussing in particular on the German aspect of the question. In their consideration of the subject of Poland and her role in Britain's East European policy the heads of the Foreign Office departments admitted to a high degree of confusion. Summing up the debate Makins noted certain important considerations. It was accepted that, irrespective of British wishes, the Polish Minister for Foreign Affairs was determined to follow his own counsel and Britain had no means of forcing him to take British considerations into account. Polish plans for the partition of Ruthenia could not be automatically seen as an undesirable development. Since it became apparent that

the new Czechoslovakia was going to be little more than a vassal to Germany it seemed that there might be certain advantages that she should be as small a state as possible and in particular that she should not carry German influence as far as the borders of Rumania and enable Germany to dominate another frontier of both Poland and Hungary.²⁷

This development would not, perhaps, be altogether detrimental to British interests. From a British point of view it was felt that

at first sight it might appear to be to our interest to do anything we could to prevent Germany getting into her hands this further weapon of influence, intrigue and possible disruption. But again there is another side to this picture, and we had to remember that if Germany gets busy with intrigues and ambitions in the Ukraine, she may be less keen to press her colonial claims against us.

Furthermore, Makins admitted that Britain really had few means of enforcing her aims in that region, even if she arrived at a decisive

statement of policy. 'In these circumstances it is difficult to see what we are to gain from strengthening Poland' was a final statement of the Foreign Office would be dismissive, as Richard Speaight of the

Sir Orme Sargent, Assistant Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, in a message to Kennard, admitted to the existence of a quandary. The situation appeared far from clear and the British government's attitude towards developments taking place was even more difficult to divine. As in the case of South Eastern Europe so in the case of Poland the Foreign Office hoped to retain some influence, possibly by retaining commercial links.²⁸ But on the other hand a decision to facilitate credits for political reasons lay with the government and their decision would not be favourable to Poland unless the government decided to view Poland and British influence there as a priority. A decision on these lines was not likely to be made unless a sudden dramatic event was to influence British politicians.

Not surprisingly, Kennard's somewhat puzzled report on 23 December stating that Colonel Beck made an ambiguous reference to the possibility of strengthening relations between Polish and British navies, fell on arid ground.²⁹ It was only to be expected that the Foreign Office would be dismissive, as Richard Speaight of the Central Department indeed was. He minuted: 'in any case Poland's future role is much too uncertain for us to want to look for closer collaboration at the moment with any branch of her armoured forces'.

By February Kennard was reporting his and his French counterpart's feelings that Beck was trying to overcome the impasse in Poland's relations with the French and British governments. At the beginning of March the Polish Chief of Staff, General Stachiewicz, made oblique references to Kennard about Polish naval action in the event of a war between Germany and Great Britain.³⁰ These moves appeared inconclusive and on their own account added little substance to Anglo-Polish relations. They are, however, more comprehensible if one takes into account developments in Poland's relations with Germany in particular over two major issues; the Ruthenian region and Danzig.

ii

The decisions of the Munich conference in effect meant that Germany was given the right of arbitration over Polish and

Hungarian claims to Czechoslovak territory. To Poland this development was of twofold importance. First, growing German influence in Roumania and Hungary prevented Poland from establishing herself as an independent power in Central and South Eastern Europe. This exposed the failure of Beck's policy of balancing between Germany and the Soviet Union. Henceforth relations in that region would be directed from Berlin and this fact was openly acknowledged in European capitals. Germany, though ostensibly still supporting Poland's anti-Czechoslovak policy, had recognised that the growth of Polish influence in Europe could be in its consequences just as well anti-Soviet as it could be anti-German. German military leaders cautioned against encouraging Poland and no support was given for Polish plans.³¹

Italy had on the whole encouraged Poland and other South East European states in their independent policies because of her own apprehensions over German long-term aims in that region. In his interview with Count Ciano, the Italian Foreign Minister, on 30 September 1938, the Polish Ambassador to Rome, Wieniawa-Długoszewski, was told that 'Mussolini had advised that Poland should by all means and everywhere cause the biggest trouble, because Britain and most of all France have the tendency of dealing with Czechoslovakia exclusively to Germany's advantage.'³² Subsequently, Italian support for Poland was abandoned in face of German disapproval. Polish politicians nevertheless chose to believe that the proposal for a Hungarian-Polish border, through the incorporation of the Czechoslovak region of Sub-Carpatho-Ruthenia into their borders, would have been realised had the Hungarians not acted treacherously and instead appealed to Germany for arbitration.³³

Secondly, the Polish Minister for Foreign Affairs had to face the question of whether Germany was acting contrary to Polish interests. In November and December 1938, Beck chose to believe that Ribbentrop had personally opposed Polish plans in Sub-Carpatho-Ruthenia.³⁴ But the Polish politicians' evaluation of the current developments was clouded by their own belief that the real object of German aggression was the Soviet Union. Thus they had persuaded themselves, and steadfastly clung to the belief, that Poland would be an essential partner in Germany's ultimate and long-term plans for expansion eastwards. This view tended to be accepted as an axiom, as was apparent from numerous discussions reported by Szembek

on various occasions.³⁵ This preconception clouded the Poles' judgement sufficiently for them to maintain that in spite of temporary setbacks, Polish-German relations remained satisfactory. By December, Poland knew that she had lost the battle for Hungary's allegiance and with it the struggle for influence in Central Europe. For instead of appealing to Poland, Hungary had successfully sought German and Italian arbitration in her dispute with Czechoslovakia and with the Vienna Award of 2 November 1938 obtained territories in Ruthenia and Slovakia. And still Beck maintained, as he did in an instruction to the Polish Ambassador in Hungary on 1 December 'our relations with Germany, in the context of European politics, continue to be good'.³⁶

The loss of influence over the breakup of Czechoslovakia caused considerable disquiet in Poland and searching questions were being asked as to Germany's ultimate aim in pursuing such an antagonistic policy in relation to Poland. But the discomfort of Poland's leaders when discussing the Czechoslovak problem was small in comparison with the alarm caused by developments in Danzig. By the end of 1938 the problem of the Free City rose to an anomalously important position in Polish-German relations as it had become the only area of possible co-operation. On 28 October Szembek recorded a conversation he had had with Marian Chodacki, the Polish High Commissioner in Danzig. Chodacki warned that the city was being mobilised and that Nazi propaganda was becoming more obvious. The return of Danzig to the Reich was being now discussed openly and various measures were leading to an increase in paramilitary organisations.³⁷ On 1 December Chodacki reported that the situation was becoming tense and that the Nazis were embarking on a directly anti-Polish offensive.³⁸ On 10 November para-Nuremberg laws had been introduced in the city and it was feared that they could lead to the destruction of the Polish economic position. On 31 December Chodacki reported the substance of a conversation he had with the League High Commissioner, Professor Burckhardt, concerning the latter's visit to Berlin, during which Ribbentrop openly stated 'that the best solution would be to annex Danzig and Klajpeda (Memel) to the Reich, as Poland, just like Czechoslovakia, would not decide to go to war, even more so because the evident chill in Poland's relations with the western powers, which will weaken Poland'.³⁹

But the anxieties of the Danzig Commissioner were not

necessarily shared by the officials in Warsaw. On 14 December Szembek recorded a conversation he had had with Lipski in which the latter assured him that the evident deterioration in Polish-German relations could not be the real aim of the Chancellor.⁴⁰ Lipski explained that various bureaux were pursuing independent policies but that the main lines of Germany's foreign policy remained unchanged. He went further to state that 'the highest bodies in the Third Reich are well aware that in resolving the future Russian problem the Germans will not be able to take action without us'. In any case, in December 1938 Beck and his advisers in the Ministry believed still that Germany would not seek a confrontation with Poland, and it was they who decided to seek a means of defusing the Danzig time-bomb, for fear of it marring what they still chose to believe to be good Polish-German relations. Thus Beck proposed to satisfy German demands in Danzig without compromising Polish rights in the city. It is notable that in 1938 Beck still saw the League and not the actions of the Danzig Nazis as the source of all his difficulties.⁴¹ These efforts to find a compromise which could be offered to the Germans and which would remove Danzig from the sphere of immediate Polish-German negotiations were to continue well into 1939. As will be shown below, they belie the assertion that the Poles became intransigent after obtaining British guarantees.

On 7 December 1939, Beck, when discussing Polish-German relations with Szembek, emphasised that Danzig could not become a bone of contention between the two states, and instructed Lipski to seek an interview with Ribbentrop in which he was to state that the minimum sought by the Poles would be for the Chancellor to repeat his guarantee of the status of the city. He was also directed to assume an unofficially favourable attitude, in the event of the extra-territorial link across the Corridor being once more mentioned.⁴² It was, therefore, in the spirit of reconciliation that Beck sought a meeting with the German leaders in January.

On 5 January, Beck had a meeting with Hitler. His hopes to resolve, or at least to remove, the issue of Danzig from the scope of problems which could sour relations between the two states, were not realized, but neither was he dissuaded from the belief that Germany needed Polish goodwill. Hitler in fact blew both hot and cold and left it to Ribbentrop to present an unequivocal demand for the return of the city to Germany. Thus Hitler soothed Beck's disquiet by asserting that the Sub-Carpatho-Ruthenian issue was of

little consequence to Germany. He stressed the importance he attached to retaining good relations with Poland and fanned Polish prejudice by referring to the need for Polish troops in a war against the Soviet Union. Although he did mention that Danzig would have to return to Germany, he qualified this by assuring the Pole that he would not face Poland with a *fait accompli*.⁴³

There was nothing in the content of the exchanges to cause Beck to doubt the whole of his relations with Germany. He admitted to being pessimistic, but there is little evidence that he viewed relations between the two states as little more than going through a period of temporary misunderstanding, in which, quite clearly, both retained a determination to show each other consideration, if not goodwill. Beck believed that what he was dealing with was not a change of policy on the part of Germany, but a game of bluff, in which the best policy would be to stand resolute, an attitude which seemed to have caused Hitler to qualify some of the statements he made during the interview.⁴⁴

On his return from Germany, Beck considered two lines of policy. On the one hand, he took into account the possibility that a compromise could be worked out whereby the League would withdraw from the Free City and instead, a Polish-German condominium could be established. A Foreign Ministry official, Michał Łubieński, recalled after the war that Beck instructed him to work out a compromise which would guarantee Polish interests in Danzig, while appearing to offer the Germans something of their demands. Beck's instructions were given after he had discussed the results of his meeting with Hitler at a meeting attended by Śmigły-Rydz and the President. Łubieński states that he had got as far as informally putting a proposal to von Moltke, the German Ambassador to Poland, for the removal of League guarantees from the city, and replacing them with a Polish-German agreement, whereby Danzig would be under nominal Polish or German control while Polish economic rights within the city would be guaranteed. Beck apparently approached Łubieński two days later, after a second meeting with the Polish heads of state, and instructed him to abandon the proposal. According to the latter, Beck said that it had been decided to treat the German demands as a bluff as it was suspected that they might attempt a coup.⁴⁵

Polish anxiety concerning German demands in Danzig was heightened by the realisation that neither France nor Britain would

take the Polish side in the event of a confrontation in the city. Indeed, it soon became apparent that both powers, but most notably Britain, continued in their traditional policy of encouraging Germany in her policy of revising her eastern borders. In addition, Polish behaviour during the Czechoslovak crisis had caused a certain amount of anger in Britain. But the only area of political contact remained that of the Free City of Danzig.

On 1 December 1938 Chodacki reported the rapid deterioration of relations between the Polish and German communities in the city.⁴⁶ On 9 December Strang informed Raczynski, the Polish Ambassador in London, of Halifax's intention to seek the withdrawal of League protection from the city by 16 January.⁴⁷ On Beck's request, the League postponed its decision. Thus the Poles saw Britain as trying to rid herself of an embarrassing commitment not because they, the British, thought it unnecessary, but primarily because developments in the Free City seemed to forecast a major international crisis. Furthermore, Polish politicians feared that the sole reason why Britain appeared to be trying to distance herself from the Danzig issue was because she felt that it was getting in the way of general appeasement of Germany. It was suspected that Polish interests were being sacrificed in the name of Britain's European policy. While Poland had always made known her determination to rid herself of League controls in the city, Polish politicians perceived British haste in the winter of 1938/9 as motivated by British determination to deal with Germany rather than to assure an equitable resolution of the situation. In particular they found British enquiries as to the state of Polish-German relations galling. Assurances were given to the British that the League Rapporteurs would be informed of any decisions made by Poland and Germany. Moreover, the Poles rejected the suggestion that German demands for an extra-territorial link across the Corridor were an ultimatum.⁴⁸ As shown above, the Poles felt themselves quite in control of their negotiations with Germany and, in any event, would most certainly not have expected help or support from the British in negotiations over the retention of their rights in Danzig.

During the period October 1938 to March 1939, Polish relations with Britain were cool. Upon Poland fell the odium of having co-operated with Germany in forcing Czechoslovakia to yield to German demands. Raczynski found it difficult to make contact with British politicians, even those who had earlier been sympathetic to

the Polish cause. In his memoirs, Raczyński states that after the Munich conference, even Samuel Hoare and Churchill, hitherto the most friendly, avoided him. He states that he recommended to Beck the retention of some British goodwill, but had little success.⁴⁹ Only in December was Beck prepared to acquiesce in some efforts being made to re-establish better relations with the British. Since the only area of interest to the British was Danzig, a topic which the Poles preferred to avoid, the best solution was to suggest some general areas for discussion. Thus, on 23 December, Kennard reported from Warsaw that, during his last conversation with Beck, the latter expressed the desire for 'maintaining and strengthening the close relations which exist between the British and Polish navies'.⁵⁰ Beck's keenness for an invitation was communicated to London on 3 February by Raczyński, who had, in the meantime, been making personal efforts to extend Anglo-Polish contacts.⁵¹

There is no doubt that in February and the first half of March, the Poles could not have hoped to obtain from Britain any support in their negotiation with Germany. Raczyński's report of 8 February on the subject of British foreign policy, clearly stressed the degree to which the whole of Eastern Europe was considered by British politicians to be outside the scope of British concerns.⁵² He noted that this attitude was most clearly visible in the case of the Soviet Union where, 'one could risk the statement that by this "forgetting" of the Soviets, Prime Minister Chamberlain was flirting with the German partner'. British official disinterest in all matters Polish contrasted with their taking up avidly the case of the Ukraine. Thus British public opinion was being encouraged to see conflicts in separation from their background, something Cadogan called 'quarantizing' when he spoke of the later British treatment of the Danzig crisis.

In a similar report dated 1 March 1939, Raczyński informed with satisfaction that the British Prime Minister appeared to be at last showing some resoluteness.⁵³ Military expenditure estimates were being increased. He presumed that Chamberlain's aim was to lead to the improvement of relations with Germany. The Polish Ambassador thought that, if suitable guarantees were given, the British would be prepared to negotiate a colonial settlement with Germany. These reports encouraged the Poles, who desired to break out of the political isolation which they felt after the Munich conference. Polish and British aims nevertheless remained different and, at times, even divergent. This fact was clearly perceived by the Polish politicians who, when considering their foreign policy

options in relation to Germany, still saw British involvement as likely to undermine Polish interests.

The Munich conference was a foreign policy coup for Germany. It also had an important effect on Germany's internal policy for it increased Hitler's influence in the army. The apprehensions of the older officers, fearful of a conflict with the west, had not been realized and Hitler was increasingly able to instil National Socialist party principles into the army.⁵⁴ Opposition within the army had been defeated and in any event Hitler set the pace of foreign policy initiatives to the extent that the army leaders were not able to claim influence over these developments.⁵⁵

This new found confidence was particularly apparent in Hitler's attitude towards Poland, hitherto an important element in his proposals for expansion eastwards. The Czechoslovak crisis had clearly manifested the degree of British and French unwillingness to oppose German revisionism, and thereby overnight debased the currency of Polish acquiescence to the break-up of Czechoslovakia. Nevertheless, Hitler still saw a need for co-operation with Poland and in November 1938 he appeared willing to court Polish goodwill. There is no doubt that Poland was no longer perceived as an equal partner in any future eastern venture, but it would appear that during the closing months of 1938 Hitler was still unclear as to the extent to which Poland was going to be required to fall in with his plans. It would appear that Hitler was 'in two minds as to whether with the help of a strong Poland, Lebensraum should be carved from Russia or with Russian aid Poland should once more be partitioned'.⁵⁶

During his January visit to Germany Beck rejected Hitler's proposal for a revision of Polish borders and the status of the Free City, but equally important, was his rejection of the German invitation to join the Anti-Comintern Pact. This appears to have altered Hitler's attitude towards Poland in so far as plans were put into effect for preparing for the military re-occupation of Danzig. At the same time hope was retained that Poland would remain as a partner, albeit a subservient one.⁵⁷ Thus the period up until the German occupation of Memel and Prague was one during which Hitler appeared ostensibly to be seeking Polish co-operation but at the same time no support was given to Polish plans for the establishment of a Polish-Hungarian border. This implicitly meant that Poland was not to be allowed to extend her political influence into South Eastern Europe.

2

March 1939 and the decision to build an eastern front

The decisions made by the British foreign policy makers during the period 18 to 31 March were momentous not merely because they were made on the background of a dramatic shift of the political balance of power in Europe, they were also crucial in so far as, for the first time since the Versailles conference, Britain was forced to consider the undesirability of Germany dominating the whole of Central and South Eastern Europe. Since the result of the major reconsideration was Britain's commitment to defend Poland, which was followed a few days later by a similar commitment to Rumania, it is only too easy to interpret the events of these critical days as leading directly and unequivocally to the assumption by Britain of a new and anti-German stance. While this indeed is the case, and led directly to Britain declaring war on Germany in September 1939, the broader context of the debate that was initiated in March 1939 can easily be overlooked.

Far more importantly, during the last two weeks of March, Britain considered not merely the case of defending either Poland or Rumania but she briefly took into account the need to face Germany with an eastern front, and one to the formation of which Britain was to declare her direct commitment. The guarantee to Poland, as announced on 31 March, and the subsequent one to Rumania were the mere crumbs of an earlier proposal for a bloc of eastern states, over which Britain was proposing to extend her guidance and which were to be united by their common desire to prevent further German aggression. Ultimately the spirit of this proposal was not sustained. It was modified once Britain took stock of the crisis and the reactions of the proposed eastern partners became known. It was nevertheless the first time that not merely was the undesirability of German expansion eastwards recognised, but also, and far more

startlingly, British politicians considered, albeit briefly, that it was in Britain's interest to seek to build-up an eastern, anti-German and pro-British front.

Initial British enquiries elicited mixed responses from the East European states. While all considered the British initiative to be an interesting one, there was no unity of interest between them. After the shock caused by German action in Czechoslovakia had abated, Britain abandoned her initial bold plan. However, her concern over events in Eastern Europe remained. While the automatic character of the proposal to the Eastern States was modified, British concern for developments east and south east of Germany was to remain and constitute a permanent feature of British foreign policy considerations from March onwards.

During the second half of March 1939 several signs of continuing German aggressive intentions were apparent. To British politicians two were considered to be most dangerous and symptomatic of German long-term aims in Europe. The first was the occupation of Prague. The second was contained in a report by the Rumanian Ambassador to London of a German ultimatum to the Rumanian government to co-ordinate the Rumanian economy to suit German requirements. On 23 March Germany, as a result of the pressure it put on the Lithuanian government, obtained the Baltic port of Memel. This was followed by the Hungarian occupation of Sub-Carpatho-Ruthenia. The latter two events elicited no response from the British government, being considered of parochial interest, but the two former lay at the root of the major British initiative in the days of 18–22 March.

Hitler's actions in Czechoslovakia were seen by Chamberlain initially as a personal affront and a blow to the trust that had been vested in him. Chamberlain's speech to Parliament on 15 March appeared to be in line with the British government's policy towards the earlier proposal to guarantee Czechoslovakia's security. Thus Chamberlain explained, in a somewhat tortuous manner, that the Slovak Diet's declaration of independence merely concluded a situation which had been a transitory one and therefore the British guarantee, which in effect had still not been completed, was not operative. Chamberlain's state of mind is further confirmed by his expression of regret that aggression had been perpetrated by Germany in this way at a time when 'confidence was beginning to revive'.¹

Chamberlain appeared to be out of touch with the mood in the House of Commons and his own Cabinet. His misjudgement of the situation was confirmed once the substance of the Tilea report became known. It is therefore his speech at Birmingham on the evening of 17 March that is seen as a first sign of a new British attitude. Indeed, in it the Prime Minister reflected a deeper concern for the nature of German actions. Clearly it was increasingly difficult to treat German aggression in Eastern Europe as of parochial concern as such aggression was likely to lead to a change in the European balance of power.²

During the Cabinet meeting of 18 March, Chamberlain and Halifax informed their colleagues of a new proposal. The substance of the discussion shows quite clearly that what perturbed the British ministers was the general nature of German aggression, the fear of Germany dominating South Eastern Europe and, in consequence, Germany obtaining Rumanian oil. At one point Chamberlain stated that his Birmingham speech was:

a challenge to Germany on the issue whether or not Germany intended to dominate Europe by force. It followed that if Germany took another step in the direction of dominating Europe, she would be accepting a challenge. A German attempt to dominate Rumania was, therefore, more than a question whether Britain would thereby improve her strategical position; it raised the whole question whether Germany intended to obtain domination over the whole of South Eastern Europe.

The Foreign Secretary's interpretation of Britain's aims was: 'The real issue was Germany's attempt to obtain world domination, which it was in the interest of all countries to resist.' It was recognised by the ministers that Britain was not in a position to aid Rumania directly. If Germany was to be forewarned of the British decision to oppose her, it was necessary to find partners in Eastern Europe. Thus the proposal, without being clearly called so, was for the creation of an eastern alliance against German aggression. The choice of potential allies was broad, it included Poland, Rumania, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Greece and the Soviet Union. A difference in emphasis is detectable in that Halifax, at this early stage, considered the Soviet Union *and* Poland to be the best rallying point for Britain's policy in the east while Chamberlain, on the whole, favoured Poland.³

The Cabinet's deliberations on the choice of a new policy against Germany was preceded by a Committee of Imperial Defence meeting which addressed itself to the enquiries, presented to them by

Cabinet, on the question of how to prevent German domination of the Rumanian economy. The quandary in which the Chiefs of Staff were placed by the essentially political nature of the enquiry is apparent from the advice offered by them. In their report the Chiefs of Staff clearly stated that action in the east could only be pursued with the assistance of the Soviet Union and Poland. Summing up, they advised the Minister for Co-ordination of Defence that 'we should at once take diplomatic action vis-à-vis Russia and Poland and we cannot tender further advice on the military aspects of the situation until we know the result of such action.' The Chiefs of Staff evaluation of the two potential eastern partners was very significant. They stated that:

If Poland were assumed to be our ally and the USSR neutral . . . we should expect the Poles to fight stoutly but surrounded as they are on three sides by Germany they would be confined to the defensive . . . If the USSR were on our side and Poland neutral, the position would alter in our favour. With Russia as our ally Germany's position in the Baltic would be difficult and it would be possible to exercise considerable interference with the part of the iron ore supplies from Sweden that crosses the Baltic.⁴

At this stage it is necessary to clarify a major issue. Simon Newman has stated in his book that: 'During the course of discussion and decision-making over the week-end of 18–19 March, the British Government explicitly confirmed their belief that German domination of South-Central Europe threatened British interests and must be resisted.'⁵ This statement suggests that German actions were seen as threatening British interests directly and that British actions were not merely anti-German of a general nature, but specifically in the defence of British interests as envisaged in the maintenance of the independence of the Rumanian economy. There is, however, no evidence to substantiate the assumption that Britain saw her interests in Central and South Eastern Europe threatened. As has been earlier shown, the British government eschewed the opportunity of using economic means to try to maintain some semblance of political influence in South Eastern Europe. German actions were viewed by the British Cabinet members in much more general terms.

It needs to be stressed that the rapid succession of two major crises caused the ministers to consider the desirability of allowing German action in Europe to proceed unchallenged. The Rumanian question itself was debated from the point of view of Germany becoming self-

sufficient in oil and not from the point of view of whether this did or did not constrain British economic interests. The establishment of an independent state of Carpatho-Ruthenia and the subsequent occupation of the area by Hungary elicited no more than a laconic statement by the Foreign Office of 'I suppose there is no need to acknowledge this.'⁶ That event, though of scant political importance could have been a dangerous one, on account of a complex web of rivalries and intrigues involving Hungary, Poland and Germany. German occupation of the port of Memel was by far more important in that it sealed German control of the Baltic area and was a clear prelude to similar action in Danzig. But it remained equally unnoted by the British Cabinet.

Thus it has to be stressed that British knowledge of Central and South East European geo-political realities was meagre and on the whole confined itself to an analysis of how these changes would reflect on Anglo-German relations rather than on how they affected the region in question. In the case of Czechoslovakia and Rumania the British government, at the height of the crisis in March, recognised the undesirability of condoning German aggression, in particular when it followed in the wake of a British initiative to pre-empt a German claim to the revision of European territorial settlements.

The Cabinet meeting on 20 March clearly reflected a less decisive mood. It moved against the earlier stated intention of rallying eastern states against German actions and in the direction of a general commitment to consult with the aim of stopping Germany. The Prime Minister made his aim clear when he stated that 'the declaration did not constitute a guarantee to the existing frontiers and the indefinite maintenance of the status quo. The declaration was concerned with a far wider issue, namely security and political independence of European states against German domination.' Throughout the meeting the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary were at pains to stress that the definition of a 'threat' was to be left vague and that Britain was not proposing to relinquish the right to define what constituted a threat to a state's security. The previous plan was accordingly modified in substance and scope. Poland, France and the Soviet Union were to be contacted to ascertain their attitude to the new proposal.⁷

Until 21 March, British plans were made without direct reference to the French government, although it was assumed that any East

European arrangement would automatically include France. This lack of co-ordination is surprising in that France had traditionally maintained close political and economic ties with Poland and Rumania and it could have been presumed that French politicians and diplomats had more up-to-date knowledge of relations in that part of Europe. British plans were nevertheless made independently of France's traditional interest in Eastern Europe.

Nor were French politicians themselves clear as to the object of Britain's policies or the feasibility of suddenly combining Poland and Rumania in a joint stand. Polish-French relations, distinctly cool during the Czechoslovak crisis and after, remained strained. The international crisis of 15-18 March inflamed old sores and, as Daladier informed the British Ambassador in Paris, Sir Eric Phipps, on 18 March, France had, in answer to a Polish enquiry about a possible German attack on Danzig, responded by stating that they would support Poland only if she concluded a defensive alliance with Rumania.⁸ France's attempts to commit Poland to support Rumania had failed and the Poles refused to co-operate with France in the event of the latter attacking Germany in defence of Rumania. In his conversation with Phipps on 18 March Aléxis Léger, the Secretary General of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, warned Britain against Beck, accusing him of cynicism and duplicity. The French suspected Poland of courting a British refusal to an alliance which they would then be able to use as a pretext for a direct alliance with Germany.⁹ Roger Cambon, the French Ambassador to London, who was equally well-informed of the political complexities of relations between Poland, Rumania and the Soviet Union, warned Sargent on 20 March that a premature arrangement with the Soviet Union could frighten Poland and Rumania and cause them to reject such an agreement. Furthermore, this would tip the delicate balance of power existing in those countries in favour of Germany and in support of neutrality, from which only Germany would benefit.¹⁰

On 21 March Bonnet visited Britain and the question of a policy towards Eastern Europe was one of the major topics of conversation. Halifax clarified Britain's aims as: 'it was now the question of checking German aggression, whether against France or Great Britain, or Holland, or Switzerland, or Rumania or Poland or Yugoslavia or whoever it might be.' Bonnet took the opportunity to draw Halifax's attention to an additional problem in trying to create an eastern front and that was the difficulty of obtaining Polish and Rumanian

agreement to Soviet participation in the scheme. As one traces the course of the discussion that took place between the French Minister for Foreign Affairs and Halifax, it is apparent that Halifax failed to grasp the nuance of Bonnet's comment. Halifax merely reiterated the need to draw in Poland in order to oppose German expansion, while Bonnet vainly expanded on the reality of the region's disunity. According to the French, Poland would have to give a commitment to defend Rumania and furthermore unless she agreed to co-operation with the Soviet Union the latter's contribution would be reduced.¹¹

Thus the French idea of a regional pact was counterpoised by Britain's somewhat simple idea of merely taking Poland as a first step and the linchpin of what Britain hoped to develop only subsequently into an interlocking combination of guarantees. Bonnet was speaking with knowledge of the Polish response to initial French enquiries. On 19 March Łukasiewicz, the Polish Ambassador in France, had given the official Polish answer to the French enquiry. In his communication Łukasiewicz had informed the French that Poland rejected the need to draw the Soviet Union into the arrangement, and was instead insisting on consultation with Hungary and Rumania.¹² This would have been a return to the old Polish policy of a 'Third Europe' and a rejection of the French Eastern Locarno proposal, which would have included the Soviet Union. Clearly the Poles and the French had not been drawn together by the Czechoslovak crisis.

During the discussions, which took place on 22 March and which this time included Chamberlain, Bonnet once more stressed the need to retain the Soviet Union in the proposal for an East European declaration.¹³ In conclusion the French Minister indicated France's determination to enter into a joint declaration, leaving the complexities of Poland, Rumania and the Soviet Union unresolved. France's advice was unheeded by the British Minister. Undoubtedly, the French attitude contained an element of pique, for none of the Anglo-French deliberations were accompanied by an increased commitment to fighting in the west. The British approach to Poland, made ostensibly on France's behalf as well, was at variance with French strategic priorities since Munich and the consequent policy of France in Eastern Europe.

The response of the Soviet Union to the general British enquiry came with embarrassing alacrity.¹⁴ Litvinof responded by propos-

ing the calling of a six power conference. Notwithstanding Stalin's speech of 10 March, in which the Soviet leader indicated that the Soviet Union no longer espoused collective security as her only foreign policy, and would henceforth pursue good relations with all states reciprocating the Soviet Union's desire for peace, the Soviet Union now saw an opportunity for a return to the idea of collective security. But by 19 March it was already realised that Soviet participation in any East European scheme could embarrass British efforts. Sensing British hesitation, the Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs clearly tried to force the pace by making the Soviet statement public.¹⁵

The subsequent British proposal for a joint declaration was taken up by the Soviet Union with equal eagerness. On 22 March Litvinov informed the British Ambassador in Moscow, Seeds, that the Soviet Union was willing to put its signature to the proposal as soon as Polish and French agreement to it had been received.¹⁶ The attitude of the Soviet Union was nevertheless by then of little consequence. Chamberlain had clearly preferred to deal with Poland as he believed the country to be the linchpin of the region. Furthermore it was becoming quickly clear that the inclusion of the Soviet Union in any proposal could be embarrassing if not outright destructive.

Thus the Polish response to the British proposals became inordinately important even before it was known. British politicians had indirectly stated their preference for dealing with Poland rather than with the Soviet Union. And while the need to defend Rumania became the most important issue by 20 March, the desire to obtain the Polish commitment to act as Britain's partner in that region brought Poland into the centre of all subsequent political considerations.

It is, however, worth noting that in Warsaw the perspective was considerably different to that assumed in London. In the first place, Poland had earlier acquiesced and sought the break-up of the Czechoslovak state and, therefore, the declaration of Slovak autonomy on the 13 March, followed by German entry into Prague and the creation of a 'protectorate' of Bohemia-Moravia were not on their own account considered cause for concern. But what did upset the Poles was the suddenness of the German move and the lack of consultation, in particular as this followed in the wake of Poland's unsuccessful attempt to increase her influence in Slovakia. Secondly and most probably more importantly, the Poles noted with deep

alarm the agreement signed by the Germans and the Lithuanians whereby Memel became German. The extension of German influence in the Baltic was considered an undesirable development and likely to increase tension in Danzig. In any event Poland took the opportunity to score a minor point against Germany when, on 16 March, Polish and Hungarian troops jointly occupied Sub-Carpatho-Ruthenia and thus achieved the ambition of creating a Hungarian-Polish border.

But it was the substance of Ribbentrop's conversation with Lipski on 21 March 1939 which caused profound concern in Warsaw.¹⁷ During the meeting, which Ribbentrop intended to be an opportunity to 'discuss Polish-German relations in their entirety' demands were made which, according to the Poles, went to the very heart of Polish-German relations. Thus Ribbentrop proposed that in return for the annexation of Danzig and permission to build an extra-territorial road and rail link across Polish territory, Germany would be prepared to guarantee Polish frontiers and Polish ownership of the Poznań region. Polish anxiety was aroused not merely because of the nature of these demands coming as they did in the wake of the German annexation of Memel but also because of the tone of Ribbentrop's conversation. Lipski at least had no doubt that this was an ultimatum. He confided to Szembek that the tone of the demands was polite but conclusive.¹⁸ Furthermore, the German Foreign Minister let the ambassador know that Germany believed Poland beholden to Germany as Germany has 'facilitated the creation of Poland'. Ribbentrop conceded that Germany did not oppose Polish and Hungarian action in Sub-Carpatho-Ruthenia. Thus Ribbentrop was threatening Poland, albeit still only through use of diplomatic vocabulary.

On 21 March the British Ambassador to Warsaw, Kennard, sought an interview with Beck during which he made a startling proposal. At the same time Halifax invited Raczynski and communicated to him the same message:

that His Majesty's Government should consent, as an exceptional measure in view of the special circumstances, to the conclusion of a confidential bilateral understanding between the two countries by which the two Governments would undertake to act in accordance with the terms of the proposed declaration, as supplemented by the interpretation which I had given to the Ambassador, at a previous consultation as regards in particular, the question of Danzig.¹⁹

In addition, the conclusion of the agreement was to be kept secret from the French. The previous statement of the British attitude towards Danzig was repeated by Halifax as:

if Poland and Germany could settle the Danzig question by direct negotiations so much the better; but if the Danzig question should develop in such a way as to involve a threat to Polish independence then this would be a matter of the gravest concern to ourselves.

The crucial question which has to be posed at this point is whether the Polish response to German demands was, therefore, the result of the simultaneously communicated British proposal and, if not, as will be suggested below, to what extent was the British initiative influential in the policy Beck henceforth assumed towards German demands?

As has already been shown, there existed no trust, no unity of interest, in fact no common ground, between the Poles and the British prior to the March crisis. Granted that Britain had the wealth and through her imperial connections, natural resources and extensive supply networks, she would have been a formidable partner to obtain. But evidence is still lacking that the Polish politicians could have conceivably hoped that, in the first place, Britain would support Polish interests in Danzig and elsewhere, and secondly, that she would place her resources at Poland's disposal. Furthermore, it is only through hindsight and knowledge of German sources, that we know that Germany was to all purposes issuing Poland with an ultimatum, when on 21 March, Ribbentrop stressed that Danzig was a German city.

The crisis of March undermined Polish confidence and, indeed, the belief that negotiations could be conducted with Germany on an equal basis, although it is doubtful that Beck and his advisers were fully aware of Poland's weakness, both political and strategic. Until the fall of Poland, Beck behaved as if Poland had potential allies in Hungary and Rumania, and guaranteed non-involvement on the part of the Soviet Union. There is no evidence to suggest that Beck presumed that, when abandoning the negotiating table with Germany, he would automatically obtain British support for Poland. Past experience would have belied such optimism. On the other hand, the need to reappraise Poland's relations with Germany and also with the western democracies, was long overdue. As has been shown, Beck and his advisers had earlier decided on a policy of

opposition to German demands, if and when they were likely to be presented.

The British proposal when it was communicated to Beck on 21 March was not therefore a starting point for a new policy of opposition to Germany. Beck's secretary, Starzeński, recalled that after his interview with Kennard on 21 March, Beck showed himself sceptical of the value of the British proposal.²⁰ He is quoted as saying 'Do they want me to go to Geneva to consult in the event of war? And what will Russia want in return? The situation is difficult but war will not break out now. There is still time for diplomacy.' There is no doubt that Beck was personally deeply gratified to be the recipient of such an urgent British invitation, but he clearly did not readjust Poland's foreign policy merely on the basis of the approach.

During the next two days several high level conferences took place at the residence of the President to discuss the crisis. Two decisions appear to have been reached.²¹ Approval was given for the response which had already been made to the British in which it was proposed to suggest a bilateral Anglo-Polish agreement. On the other hand it was also decided to communicate to the Germans a message indicating a line beyond which Poland was not going to make concessions. This was defined as a unilaterally arrived at and imposed solution on the question of Danzig. Polish politicians appreciated that in this formulation Danzig was acquiring a symbolic meaning, but this was precisely what they wanted, i.e. a warning to Germany. Although the Poles spoke of the possibility of war breaking out as a result of such a stand being assumed, it is doubtful whether they believed that this would indeed happen. In the written records of the two-day conference it was concluded with reference to Germany:

This enemy is a troublesome element, since it seems he is losing the means of thinking and acting. He might recover that measure once he encounters determined opposition, which hitherto he has not met with. The mighty have been humble to him, and the weak have capitulated in advance, even at the cost of honour. The Germans are marching all across Europe with nine divisions; with such strength Poland would not be overcome. Hitler and his associates know that, so that the question of a political contest with us will not be like the others.²²

There are numerous indications that Beck hoped that Poland's resoluteness would cause the Germans to reconsider their attitude. Instructions sent to Lipski which were communicated to Ribbentrop on 25 March were couched in a conciliatory tone and stress was laid

on reminding the Germans of Polish goodwill towards the Nazi Senate in Danzig and of willingness to consider German proposals for improving communications with East Prussia.²³ The rejection of the German demand for the incorporation of Danzig into the Reich was accompanied by an assurance that Poland had always sought to negotiate a direct Polish–German agreement concerning the city. Finally, and interestingly, the Polish communication was concluded by an assurance that Poland still remained committed to an anti-Soviet policy.

Drexel Biddle, the American Ambassador to Poland and a man whom Beck had on other occasions used to make unofficial policy statements²⁴ reported a similar conciliatory tone on the part of the Poles. Thus Biddle reported on 26 March that Beck stated ‘that it was its [the Polish government’s] intention to treat German demands with the utmost liberty, with the only reservation that Poland could not surrender the sovereignty over the territory through which the transit road would pass’.²⁵

When the first proposal was made to Beck, he was profoundly suspicious of the British. His main objection was to a direct association with the Soviet Union, which he feared would lead to a direct conflict with Germany. This theme was developed in notes appended to a ministry message to Raczyński on 23 March. Claiming to be quoting Beck, his *Chef de Cabinet* Łubieński wrote:

I am deeply convinced that the enmity presently existing between Berlin and Moscow is of the sort, that to include the Soviet Union in any agreement could, in a sudden manner, precipitate a general conflict. Maybe it is not in our (i.e. that of Poland, France and Great Britain) interest to hasten such conflict. From our experiences we know that Germany without difficulties tolerates our relations with France. I believe, therefore, that our attitude towards Britain would cause no more than a response in the press.²⁶

The British initiative did nevertheless have its obvious merits. It appeared to strengthen Poland’s position in Europe and could be viewed as a culmination of Beck’s earlier efforts for conciliation with Britain after the unease of Munich. Beck wrote subsequently that in the event of war Britain could prove to be a powerful ally.²⁷ Poland had already faced the deterioration of her relations with Germany to an extent that war or at least some military threat appeared likely in the future. To ignore the military and material potential which the British Empire could offer was not something even Beck, traditionally opposed to big power tutelage, could overlook. Nevertheless,

before Poland committed itself to the British side, Beck sought to denude the British proposal of its more controversial aspects. These issues were discussed at length during Beck's visit to London in April. Nor were the Polish leaders united in their evaluation of the sincerity of the British move. Łukasiewicz, the Polish Ambassador to Paris, and a notable proponent of the Piłsudski ideology and confidant of Beck's, wrote a report on 29 March in which he asserted that during the last twenty years both France and Britain had failed in all their international undertakings. He stated bitterly 'Sadly, probably tragically, in the present situation it is not the interests of individual states that are the issue, but without exaggeration, it is an attempt to avoid a military conflict.'²⁸

The British government returned to the question of action to be taken against German aggression in Central and Eastern Europe at the meeting of the Foreign Policy Committee of the Cabinet on 27 March 1939. Though it was suggested by the Prime Minister in the opening comments that Britain now faced three alternative courses of action, these were really narrowed down to two. Britain's alternatives were stated as:

- 1 a public declaration by Britain, France and Russia on the lines of our draft
- 2 a secret bilateral understanding to the same effect between Great Britain and Poland
- 3 into this framework to fit the existing French and Polish obligations of consultation and assistance as provided for in the Franco-Polish Treaty.²⁹

In effect, two possible courses of action faced the British policy makers. The importance of these alternatives was that they were mutually exclusive. Thus it became apparent that on the one hand the Soviet Union was not merely willing to join the British in their initiative against Germany. The Soviet Union reacted with alacrity to the British approach and showed itself willing to expand its obligations to join forces with Britain. In spite of earlier pronouncements, collective security was still a strong preference on the part of the Russians. On the other hand Britain had gauged Polish and Rumanian opinion sufficiently to be confident of their willingness to enter into agreements with Britain. But both countries vehemently opposed the inclusion of the Soviet Union in any agreement. As had been shown, Poland sought agreements which would strengthen her

but was reluctant to join into directly anti-German commitments. As early as 22 March the Cabinet had been informed of Rumania's reluctance to enter into agreements which could provoke Germany. The substance of Tilea's report had since been modified by a communication from Bucharest assuring the British government that no ultimatum had been issued by Germany. But the Chancellor of the Exchequer had correctly summarised Rumania's position as 'she did not want Germany to become too angry'.³⁰

Thus the Foreign Policy Committee to all purposes addressed itself only to the second possibility. Without stating so clearly the Prime Minister and the Foreign Affairs Secretary led their colleagues away from the discussion of the Soviet proposals to debate the merit of seeking an agreement with Poland which would in effect mean that Poland would commit herself to the defence of Rumania. This was in spite of the fact that the prime object of the committee's discussion was the defence of Rumania and the undesirability of Germany obtaining direct access to her oil stocks. The mutually exclusive nature of the two alternatives which faced the British Ministers meant that they in effect rejected at this stage a politically unequivocal agreement with the Soviet Union, one which would undoubtedly have been seen by Germany as directly hostile to herself and would furthermore have to be concluded without the participation of the other East European states. By 27 March Britain no longer sought direct action against Germany and thus chose the other alternative in the form of a loose front with Poland, as a starting point. It was presumed that this could be expanded to include Rumania, now reduced to an object of policy rather than a partner, and later also Yugoslavia.

The advantage of this proposal was the fact that, it gave the appearance of an initiative being taken to halt German action. During the Cabinet meeting on 29 March Chamberlain expanded on this need to defer to Polish wishes as an explanation for temporarily shelving approaches to the Soviet Union. Going counter to military advice, tendered earlier, Halifax stated that 'if we had to make a choice between Poland and Soviet Russia it seemed clear that Poland would be the greater value'.³¹

The exclusively political nature of the discussions of the Foreign Policy Committee of 27 March is apparent, and no pretence was made that the military aspects of the idea had been taken into account. While the idea of an eastern front was repeatedly used

during the discussions it was clearly a political front. The Minister for Co-ordination of Defence voiced his deep apprehension when he enquired, 'whether we could do anything effective in the west which would stop Poland and Rumania from being overrun and absorbed by Germany. For example, would the number of German troops which Poland and Rumania would draw off enable France successfully to attack and breach the Siegfried line.' Halifax answered by saying that 'he agreed that there was probably no way in which France and ourselves could prevent Poland and Rumania from being overrun'. Finally the Prime Minister declined to comment on the President of the Board of Trade's suggestion that Britain should seek an agreement simultaneously with the Soviet Union.

It is notable that the Cabinet members were not familiar with the views of the Chiefs of Staff and the Joint Planning Sub-Committee. Brian Bond in his book, *British Military Policy Between the Two World Wars*, has suggested that Chamberlain most probably suppressed their preliminary reports dated 28 March, because the conclusions suggested that the Chiefs of Staff were strongly opposed to Britain guaranteeing Poland and Rumania, and pointed to British inability to make these commitments militarily viable.³² Furthermore, the military chiefs stressed the importance of including the Soviet Union in any arrangement the British government considered making in relation to Eastern Europe. Brian Bond also draws attention to the fact that Lord Chatfield, who undertook to summarise the views of the Chiefs of Staff at a crucial Cabinet meeting on the 29th, deliberately misrepresented it. The military report, when presented, was dated 3 April and unfortunately had no bearing upon the government's decisions prior to or after that date.

The British ministers, led by the Prime Minister and Halifax, had made their choice and that was confirmed at the Cabinet meeting on 29 March.³³ But the complacent discussion around the subject of which of the two countries was to become the axiom of Britain's eastern policy was disturbed by news of Polish-German talks concerning Danzig. For notwithstanding Halifax's earlier assertion to Raczyński that a German attack on Danzig would be considered a *casus belli*, no British Conservative would commit himself to the defence of the Free City. Thus rumours of a pending conflict in Danzig could only weaken a British resolve to enter into a secret bilateral agreement with Poland.

The British Consul in Danzig, Shepherd, had been sending well-

informed reports of the rise in tension in the city. In particular, he warned on 22 March, that the Danzig Nazis spoke openly of their determination to return the city to the Reich.³⁴ But the substance of these reports was on the whole overlooked. Rumours spread concerning Polish–German talks. The British government found itself in a quandary when the Poles refused to make the British privy to these discussions. It was the Polish reluctance to inform, rather than the lack of information, that caused the feeling of bewilderment which is apparent in discussions of the Cabinet and the Foreign Policy Committee at this time. The fact that information concerning the state of Polish–German relations over Danzig came via the United States ambassador increased the British belief that potentially dangerous exchanges were taking place. On 27 March Phipps reported from Paris that the United States ambassador ‘assured me that the Germans intimated to Poland about three days ago that they wished the Danzig question settled before Easter’.³⁵

Kennard tried to ascertain the nature of Polish–German exchanges in Poland. On 28 March he reported that during conversations he had with the Deputy Minister and other officials of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, it was admitted that Germany ‘may demand the more drastic solution of annexation but for the moment there is no indication of a threatening attitude on the part of Germany’. Beck also confirmed that he would be prepared to make concessions but only in so far as the city remained sovereign.³⁶ On 29 March Kennard had another conversation with the Deputy Minister. By that time he had pieced together rumours of Polish–German discussions about Danzig, and as we know now, his information was accurate. Furthermore, the Poles gave him official confirmation of these rumours.³⁷ But the Poles were not forthcoming and that continued to cause anxiety in Britain. On the same day the United States Embassy in London informed the Foreign Office of the content of a telegram sent from the United States Embassy in Warsaw to Washington. In it the Ambassador reported that Germany was planning to follow up the Memel coup with an attack on Danzig in particular since it was assumed by Hitler that Britain would remain passive.³⁸

These developments caused the Cabinet to reconvene on 30 March. During this meeting Poland was suddenly the sole object of concern. Up until that moment Poland had been considered first as one of the possible eastern allies and subsequently as the main

eastern partner. But Rumania had been the object of British efforts and the need to prevent Rumanian oil from falling into German hands the most important issue. By 30 March it appeared as if Poland could, on her own account, merit attention and the emphasis changed to that of preventing aggression taking place against Poland. The Cabinet was to all purposes stampeded into action. By 27 March the British proposal was starting to crystallise into a general commitment to the creation of an East European front in which Poland, in preference to the Soviet Union, was to be the main pillar of British political manoeuvre. Now the Cabinet meeting of 30 March was faced with the frightening possibility of a new aggressive move by Germany against Poland.

Halifax personally seemed to feel the need to take action. He had had an interview with Ian Colvin, the correspondent of the *News Chronicle*, who offered proof of Germany's intention to attack.³⁹ Halifax perceived an urgent need to take action to forestall Hitler's plans. Belatedly he regretted that the Czechoslovak army was no longer on the British and French side and his advocacy of urgent action arose from a fear that Poland too would be lost. While Britain had never contemplated the defence of Czechoslovakia, the psychological effects of rumours concerning German action against Poland, just as Britain was ponderously arriving at the tentative conclusion that an eastern front would be necessary in the event of a war with Germany, was very important.

Thus the Cabinet allowed itself to be persuaded of the need to take action, though some of the ministers, notably the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, W. S. Morrison, appeared to be singularly unwilling to accept the need for urgency. The British decision to make a declaration of intent to support Poland against German aggression was made hastily and in order to preempt possible German action of which rumours were increasing. The advice of the military chiefs, though requested earlier, was not presented at the Cabinet meetings of 30 and 31 March.

On 31 March the Foreign Office received a report by Brigadier Beaumont Nesbitt of the War Office in which he assessed the information concerning Danzig.⁴⁰ The report concluded that Germany was certainly trying to force Poland to accept a compromise. But the Brigadier thought that the Polish population would be prepared to accept the loss of Danzig providing it did not take the form of a coup and did not mean the loss of the Corridor too. A notable feature of this and earlier reports concerning Danzig is that the British

appeared to have received accurate information concerning German intentions towards Danzig, but still they were unable to draw any conclusions from this information. Polish-German relations were an open secret in European capitals yet their significance seems to have remained an enigma.

Earlier the Committee of Imperial Defence had been instructed to consider the 'Military Implications of an Anglo-French Guarantee of Poland and Rumania.' These were discussed by the Joint Policy Committee on 28 March and a report was presented to the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee on 3 April.⁴¹ The problems arising from proposed British and French military action in the event of a German attack in the East were being debated for the first time, although earlier the military chiefs had considered the implications of France and Britain being at war with Germany and Italy. The report of the Joint Policy Committee confined itself therefore to the presentation of the case of action in the event of Germany attacking eastwards or being obliged to keep military forces in the east against Polish and Rumanian attack. It was further assumed that the Soviet Union would remain benevolently neutral.

The Chiefs of Staff stated in the report that neither Poland nor Rumania would be of any consequence in fighting a naval war and an alliance with them would not offer Britain any strategic advantages. When debating aerial action, the Chiefs of Staff considered British involvement in an East European war to be a distinct disadvantage for they assumed that Germany would 'refrain in the initial stages from an attack on Great Britain and possibly also on France, until she had settled accounts with Poland and Rumania'. This weakness was stressed in a further statement in which it was pointed out that:

it would be unwise to assume that the scale of air attack which France and Great Britain would have to face, if they intervened when Germany was attacking Poland and Rumania, would be materially less intense than in a war in which Poland and Rumania were neutral.

When assessing the army's value the Polish one was merited as high, both on account of the modern equipment, which it had recently received, and because of good morale, while the value of the Rumanian army was described as extremely low. The supply of armaments from the Soviet Union was considered essential to the Polish war effort. In conclusion it was stated that in the event of a German attack eastwards 'it would only be a matter of time (prob-

ably only a matter of months) before Poland was eliminated from the war'.

Italian intervention on the German side was considered not merely from a military point of view but the Chiefs of Staff ventured to make a political statement that 'if Germany would be certain of Italian support, she would feel that her prospects of rapid success in her attack on Poland and/or Rumania would be enhanced, and this would tend to minimise the deterrent effect on Germany of our guarantee to Poland and Rumania'. The analysis of the Polish and Rumanian guarantee's implications concluded with a highly significant statement:

when considering the question of any form of guarantee to Poland and Rumania it must be borne in mind that Great Britain and France could afford them no direct support by sea, on land or in the air to help them to resist a German invasion. Furthermore, in the present state of British and French armament production, neither Great Britain nor France could supply any armaments to Poland and Rumania who would have to depend for assistance in this respect solely on the U.S.S.R.

The British guarantee to Poland made by Chamberlain in the House of Commons on 31 March was a startling departure from previous British policy not merely towards Central and South Eastern Europe but also towards Germany. This combined with the fact that Britain did declare war on Germany because of the latter's attack on Poland in September, has frequently led historians to see this event as being a manifestation of a new policy and resolve on the part of Chamberlain's government. The unique nature of this initiative was indeed contained in the determination to oppose continued German aggression. But the guarantee in Poland was a retreat from the initial comprehensive British proposal towards Central and South Eastern Europe which had been considered in the wake of German action in Prague. This commitment had never been intended to be a direct and unequivocal commitment to defend the sovereignty of Polish territory. The political nature of the British gesture is further confirmed by the scant attention politicians paid to strategic aspects of the proposal to oppose Germany in the east. Furthermore, the granting of a public commitment to defend Poland on 31 March was not followed by joint provisions to make this commitment operative. The period April to September 1939 is far more revealing in that respect and shows up the haphazard nature of British considerations and plans made in March.

3

The British guarantee to Poland

On 31 March at 3 p.m. after informing the House of Commons that consultations were in progress between Britain and other countries Chamberlain proceeded to announce:

In order to make perfectly clear the position of His Majesty's Government in the meantime before these consultations are concluded, I now have to inform the House that during the period in the event of any action which clearly threatened Polish independence, and which the Polish Government accordingly consider it vital to resist with their national forces, His Majesty's Government would feel themselves bound at once to lend the Polish Government all support in their power. They have given the Polish Government an assurance to this effect.¹

By giving the above guarantee to Poland Chamberlain's government appeared to have confused two policies. On the one hand, it had singled out from among all the Central East European states one country rather than persist with the previous proposal for a united front of all states opposed to German aggression. On the other hand it was hoped to preempt German actions in Danzig. The effect was that the possibility of an eastern front against Germany was lost and replaced by a commitment to a state which was Germany's most likely next object of aggression. The commitment has no substance either in political or in military terms.

It is doubtful that Chamberlain himself realised the dangerous consequences of such truncation of the old proposal. The significance of the commitment was doubted within hours of it being made and not least of all by the recipients of it. But Chamberlain believed that the speech had been 'unprovocative in tenor but firm, clear but stressing the important points (perceived by *The Times* alone), that what we are concerned with is not the boundaries of

states but attack on their independence. And it is we who will judge whether their independence is threatened or not.² Thus it is interesting to note what *The Times* of 1 April had to say on the subject of the guarantee and which Chamberlain saw as an apt interpretation of his intentions. *The Times* editorial of 1 April stated:

Mr Chamberlain's statement involves no blind acceptance of the status quo. On the contrary, his repeated reference to free negotiations imply that he thinks that there are problems in which adjustments are still necessary. The stand which Great Britain and France are making is simply for a return to decent and normal methods of diplomacy . . . The process of bullying and despoiling must be stopped. The relative strength of nations will always and rightly be an important consideration in diplomacy. But the elementary rights and liberties of small states must be maintained. Independence in negotiations must be restored to the weaker party. This is the essence of yesterday's declaration. This country has never been an advocate of the encirclement of Germany and is not now opposed to the extension of Germany's economic activities and influence, nor to the constructive work she may yet do for Europe.³

Thus the guarantee in spite of the vocabulary employed was intended by Chamberlain to be a warning against aggression rather than a commitment to the defence of Poland. This nuance of the Prime Minister's speech was not lost on many politicians. Raczynski calling on Sargent on 1 April complained that 'it was so worded as to give perhaps a wrong impression to those who wished to minimise its importance'. He further stated that 'paragraph 2 of the Prime Minister's statement might be so distorted as actually to weaken and undermine the position of the Polish Government vis-à-vis of Germany. It seemed to suggest that there were large and urgent questions in dispute between the two countries and that immediate negotiations were necessary and desirable in order that they should be settled.'⁴ Seeds reported a similar reaction on the part of Litvinof. The Soviet Union was truculent and accused Britain of negligence towards Soviet counter-proposals. Litvinof remained, Seeds reported, 'unmoved in spite of my argument that the Prime Minister's statement covered only an interim arrangement'.⁵ On the day following the declaration *The Times* reported that the Polish 7 per cent bonds rose 48½ on the Stock Exchange, a reflection surely that the financial markets did not anticipate war.

Re-reading his diary of the pre-war years Cadogan wrote in 1964 that the guarantee to Poland was a personal gesture by Chamberlain: 'it set up a signal post for himself. He was committed and in the

event of a German attack on Poland would be spared the agonising doubts and indecisiveness.⁶

But the important question which has to be asked at this point is whether indeed the guarantee, or rather the decision to make it, did in any way affect the future course of British policy. If it did signal a new line of approach to Germany, was this merely a gesture of temporary significance? Indeed did Britain make any attempt to develop this very *ad hoc* gesture into an effective alliance? Furthermore, did the gratuitously received guarantee alter Poland's policy towards Germany; did it cause her to assume suddenly a different attitude; did it also possibly influence her future actions? These major points are fundamental to the understanding of not merely the months preceding the outbreak of the war, but to the knowledge of the very origins of the war.

British politicians hoped that any lingering doubts concerning the suitability of Poland as Britain's eastern partner would be dispelled during Beck's visit to London. This visit which had been earlier sought by Beck, had been scheduled for 4 April. While at the planning stage it was presumed that it would be confined to an exchange of generalities, by the end of March it had acquired considerably more significance. Already in the opening days of March British Ambassadors in Warsaw and Bucharest had reported an increase in interest in Britain's role and had also noted the extent of Polish-Rumanian contacts. On 6 March Kennard informed the Foreign Office of a conversation he had with the Rumanian Minister for Foreign Affairs who in reference to a recent visit to Poland had expressed himself 'satisfied with the result of his visit as it had shown that Poland's and Rumania's views on the majority of questions of common interest were now identical'.⁷ The thorny question of Hungary and Polish aspirations to a common border with that country had appeared to be overcome by Gafencu's expression of agreement to the establishment of a Polish-Hungarian border. The Foreign Office noted optimistically that 'one can almost see the beginning of a new grouping of East European states of which the chief common aim would inevitably be resistance to German expansion'.

The crisis of March had caused Chamberlain's government to focus upon Poland and Rumania as the two East European states on which a new British policy would be based. In the face of the need to preempt German aggression in Rumania Britain's hand was forced. She had now offered a guarantee to Poland and still hoped to induce

the Poles to guarantee Rumanian security. It was therefore with a certain amount of bewilderment that Halifax reported to the Cabinet on 5 April that the outcome of his discussions with Beck had not gone along hoped-for lines. Far from presenting himself as the head of a small supplicant state, Beck skilfully handled the enquiries of the Prime Minister and Halifax and in a manner more befitting a lord distributing largesse, freely promising Polish aid in various contingencies presented by the British. He thus redirected the conversation upon issues considered by him as vital.⁸ The bilateral character of the British commitment was confirmed by Beck and assurances were made by him that the Polish government would consider granting assistance to the British in the event of a German attack on Holland, Belgium, Switzerland or Denmark.

When questioned on the state of Polish-German relations over Danzig Beck confirmed only one thing, which was the British politicians' belief that he was a very 'slippery customer' indeed. For in spite of rumours concerning the nature of German demands Beck refuted them lightly and assured the British politicians that on this matter he could reach an agreement with Germany which would give satisfaction to Germany while retaining what was essential to Poland.

Most importantly, Beck's visit had destroyed any hope that still existed for the creation of a consolidated eastern alliance based on some unity of interests between the Central and South East European states. The Polish Foreign Minister refused to be drawn on any questions of extending the commitment to other states. He declined to discuss the case of Yugoslavia, decisively rejected the desirability or wisdom of drawing the Soviet Union into any arrangement and finally declared that the extension of the Polish-Rumanian Treaty to cover the case of an attack by Germany was a matter to be discussed by the Poles and the Rumanians.

Chamberlain admitted that he had initially hoped to lead to an

understanding with Poland, Russia, Rumania and later with Turkey and Greece . . . but that Poland would not set her pen to any new system of collective security. We were thus offered by Poland not even a Three Power Pact, but a Two Power Pact, and every attempt which we had made to suggest that other Powers should be brought into the arrangement had been quietly but firmly resisted by Colonel Beck.

Not only was Beck effectively and knowingly torpedoing the British

scheme as it had been put to him initially, but he further refused to recognise the importance of preserving the autonomy of other eastern states. While he did vaguely promise to open talks with the Rumanians his attitude towards that state was amply manifested when Chamberlain put to him the hypothetical case of Germany presenting Rumania with

an ultimatum demanding the right to receive all Rumanian oil and wheat, and threatening if Rumania failed to give an affirmative answer within a few hours, say, to lay Bucharest in ruins. Beck replied that this was a matter for the Rumanians to decide. If they had sufficient courage, they would decline to agree, and in his opinion assistance should in that event be afforded to Rumania. Beck could not promise that Poland would give Rumania a specific assurance of assistance if she resisted such German demands.

Thus the British politicians found themselves duped into granting Poland a guarantee, an exercise in which they were not wholly unwilling partners, for as Chamberlain concluded his report of Beck's visit, 'he was by no means indisposed to negotiate a Two Power Pact with Poland. After all, Poland was the key to the situation and an alliance with Poland would ensure that Germany would be engaged in a war on two fronts'.

Halifax's mind was already racing towards new ideas. Having seen Hudson, the Secretary of the Department of Trade who had recently returned from a fact-finding tour of European capitals including Moscow, Halifax had formulated a new proposal. That was for two tri-partite blocs; Great Britain, France and the Soviet Union in one and Great Britain, France and Poland in the other. The idea of an eastern bloc was being gradually but surely shelved. The attitude of the Polish Minister could not have been as decisive as would appear from the content of the Cabinet meeting. But the issue worth stressing is that Beck's determined unwillingness to consider any form of agreement with the Soviet Union struck an echo with the Prime Minister. Furthermore his stress on the need to avoid provoking Germany and apparent keenness to avoid threatening and encircling policies towards Germany were received by Halifax and Chamberlain, in particular, with relief. Beck's determination to continue negotiating with Germany, but from a position of strength, found ready understanding with Chamberlain, who in the meantime had arrived at the same conclusion. One could risk the statement that the concept of an eastern front died with the granting of the guarantee to Poland, for Poland had thus been plucked out of relative political

obscurity and cast in the role of the chosen eastern partner because of her attitude not merely towards the other eastern partners, Rumania and the Soviet Union, but also because of her belief in her ability to retain her independence in relation to Germany. And thus this choice of an eastern partner effectively destroyed any hope that she could be the cornerstone of an East European anti-German bloc.

While the question of Poland, Rumania and the Soviet Union was to a lesser or greater extent constantly preoccupying the Cabinet members until the outbreak of the war, these countries were no longer seen jointly as partners in the proposed eastern bloc. After March each of the East European countries received attention individually. Two countries in particular, Poland and the Soviet Union, became respectively objects of British foreign policy considerations, but that was because each came to represent different strands of policy. They were viewed separately from the concept of an Eastern European alliance, which had lost any real significance. In relation to Poland British politicians saw themselves increasingly drawn into the Danzig conflict, while in the case of the Soviet Union, Chamberlain, yielding with ill grace to pressure from outside and inside his own party, succumbed to demands for the initiation of talks for a British–French–Soviet agreement.

Rumania, never credited with an ability to defend itself, and, after the embarrassing episode of the Tilea report, doubted because of unwillingness to rebuff German demands on its economy, had become a transient object of discussion. During the Albanian crisis the Cabinet returned briefly to the Rumanian subject, fearing that Italian aggression might precipitate German action in that region. The Cabinet discussed the possibility of preventing such action on 10 April. As the Secretary of State for War anxiously questioned British preparedness for war and pointed out that British ships should be sent to the Ionian Sea, the Prime Minister cut the discussion short by stating that it was impossible to take it further. The matter was referred to the Committee for Foreign Affairs with a warning from Chamberlain that 'it was clear that it was unlikely that we could prevent Rumania being over-run if attacked. We could however make it clear that if she was attacked we should declare war on Germany and that might act as a deterrent.' In any case Chamberlain had already decided to leave the question of a guarantee to Rumania to Poland and, as Halifax confirmed, 'it had been

decided that the first move must be made by Colonel Beck'.⁹

On 13 April Chamberlain yielded to pressure from the French government, which threatened to offer a guarantee to Rumania independently of Britain, and announced a British commitment to defend Rumania. This was followed up by a similar one to Greece. The latter together with Turkey, because of British efforts in her direction, had been referred to during the March crisis days as participants in a general British initiative towards Eastern Europe. But ultimately Greece and Turkey, and British policy considerations in that region, were part of a Mediterranean strategy and as such fall beyond the scope of this work.

Polish lack of support for the British attempt to include Greece and Rumania in a joint anti-German agreement was confirmed when on 14 April the Poles issued a statement dissociating themselves from the initiative towards Rumania and stressing that 'these unilateral guarantees given by Great Britain were outside the framework of the Four Power Pact and Polish-French alliance and that no fresh obligation had thereby been created for Poland'.¹⁰ In a conversation with Kennard on 14 April Beck justified Poland's attitude towards the guarantee to Rumania by saying that 'it was not so much the question of the necessity of helping Rumania, as the manner in which some system of support was being devised'. Kennard confirmed this when he pointed out that 'it was illusory for Poland to hope that she could still keep Hungary out of the orbit of the Axis but Colonel Beck said that while there was 1% of hope he did not intend to abandon it'. Beck's arguments were concluded by his insistence that Poland's western border was more important than its southern frontier.¹¹

This attitude was not wholly opposed by Rumania. For the Rumanians were acutely aware of the need not to act in a manner likely to provoke Germany. Sir R. Clive reported on 21 April a conversation he had with Grigore Gafencu, Rumanian Foreign Minister. Gafencu warned the French and the British against the wiles of Colonel Beck and in particular over his dealings with Germany. But simultaneously he echoed the opinion emphasised earlier by Beck that it was dangerous and provocative to Germany to include the Soviet Union in any agreement.¹² During his visit to London on 24 April Gafencu explained Beck's reasoning to Halifax as:

The Polish-Rumanian Alliance had been made against Russia. Historically and politically Russia was the danger, moreover she was a neighbour. There

had been no need to make it against Germany since Rumania was not a neighbour of Germany. If Hungary attacked Rumania, Rumania could defend herself alone. If Germany attacked Poland, Rumania would have her hands full on her Hungarian and Bulgarian frontier and would not be able to send much help to Poland. If there was a general war, both Poland and Rumania would obviously be in the same camp. That being so, what was the point of formally extending a pact if the only result would be to irritate the German Government?¹³

During his visit to Britain Gafencu confirmed what had gradually become known to Chamberlain and Halifax, namely that notwithstanding Britain's willingness to enter into Central and South East European politics, the political complexities of that region and the all pervading apprehension over Germany's next move were tending to undermine their attempt to unite that region behind the British effort to create an anti-German bloc of states.

As stated earlier, the case of the Soviet Union became separated from considerations around a broad eastern bloc. None of the eastern states would agree to join into any arrangement involving the Soviet Union. Poland, in particular, but Rumania also, were hostile to the Soviet Union as there were traditional and long-standing areas of disagreement and territorial claims which it was feared that the Soviet Union would seek to rectify if brought into any European conflict. But equally important, and at this stage most probably crucial, was the realisation that the drawing in of the Soviet Union into any political arrangement, however vaguely phrased, would be viewed by Germany as provocative. None of the Central and South East European states, with which Britain was in touch, wanted to provoke German action. The conclusion of any agreement with the Soviet Union would inevitably give it an unequivocally aggressive character and present it as directed against Germany. And while Britain appeared to be entering into Central and South East European politics during these days she still had not proven herself willing or able to prevent German aggression. Thus a willingness to pursue conciliatory policies towards Germany was a characteristic of the foreign policies of these states, even those which had already been given British guarantees, namely Poland and Rumania.

However unwilling Chamberlain was to approve approaches which would draw the Soviet Union into the scope of British policy, this attitude did not dispel the unease of either his Cabinet colleagues, Conservative back-benchers or opposition politicians. Indeed, it was as a result of their combined pressure that the Cabinet was to reconsider this attitude and tentatively move towards approv-

ing contacts with the Soviet Union with the explicit aim of securing a Soviet commitment which would fall in with the British obligations already assumed in Eastern Europe.

Chamberlain remained nevertheless consistently opposed to any contacts with the Soviet Union and his attitude during discussions was throughout truculent. A study of Cabinet and Foreign Office papers reveals that in his unwillingness to define his policy towards the Soviet Union, the Prime Minister chose simply either to ignore the question of the need to make a decision or confined himself to casting doubts upon the value of any assistance the Soviet Union could offer.¹⁴ Chamberlain's own preference remained for discussing the question of drawing Italy away from Germany and inexplicably, on several occasions, as will be shown, he diverted discussion in the Cabinet and the Foreign Policy Committee away from the question of the eastern front and onto that of evaluating the effect that Italy's neutrality would have in the event of a German attack on Poland.

The period from March onwards was characterised not merely by Britain's assumption of direct political obligations in relation to countries which were the next possible objects of German action. It also marked a break with the previous reluctance to make military commitments to fighting on the Continent. It had been earlier accepted that Britain needed an army to fight in Europe but now Britain showed her willingness to open negotiations with the aim of co-ordinating detailed military plans with the French.

On 8 February the Cabinet had approved the initiation of military talks with the French. The first stage dealing with general plans was completed on 4 April. The second, relating to detailed strategic plans, took place between 24 April and 3 May. During this phase of joint planning the subject of the eastern front was discussed. But while the period from March onwards was one in which detailed preparations were made for war with Germany, the scope of these preparations was confined to the western front. Despite making passing reference to the eastern front, there remained a noticeable reluctance to face the military implications of the guarantees to Poland and Rumania and the overall need for an eastern front, whether it was to be one created by the new allies or the Soviet Union.¹⁵

Political commitments, which were distributed without due consideration being given as to how they could be honoured, were accompanied by equally sudden changes concerning financial restrictions on expenditure for military purposes. On 29 March

Chamberlain acting on advice from Hore Belisha announced the doubling of the Territorial Army.¹⁶ This was followed on 26 April by an announcement of the introduction of conscription. The haste with which these measures were presented inevitably led to a certain amount of confusion. While the propaganda effect of these measures on enemy and allied morale could have been momentous, their implications were lost on both because of the absence of strong political action. Thus the decision to introduce limited conscription was made without a simultaneous decision to introduce a state of emergency. Halifax explained at a Cabinet meeting on 26 April that he feared 'possible effect on the City and the inconvenience which would result from our having to inform authorities all over the world that, although we had declared an emergency, they were not to take the action which they had been instructed to take when that contingency occurred'.¹⁷ Caution had not been thrown to the wind, and evidently contradictory fears on the one hand that Germany needed to be warned against aggression and on the other that precipitate action on the part of the British could provoke German action, had still not been resolved.

It was nevertheless recognised by the Cabinet that war could break out in the nearest future and military preparations needed to be made against such an eventuality. Financial stringencies had been at the root of the earlier decision to restrict armament programmes. But in March it was conceded that the subject required serious reconsideration. On 18 March the Cabinet approved the creation of a Committee on Defence Programmes and their Acceleration. Its life span was very short. Indeed, as its members had decided that their task was rapidly completed, all voted for the committee to be wound up on 12 July. The committee had been instrumental in preparing plans for the rearmament of the infantry, acceleration of production and co-ordination of the various tasks concerning rearmament programmes. Its work was nevertheless hampered still, even at this late date, by the Treasury's reluctance to abandon control over spending.¹⁸ And while plans continued to be made with the aim of making good the most obvious deficiencies, the Treasury's stifling control over expenditure was not removed. The committee and the military chiefs were still obliged to justify their expenditure proposals to the Treasury which retained a strict control and the right of veto over civilian as well as military budgets.

The British guarantee to Poland far from having precipitated the Poles into a new course in their foreign relations with Germany, was

viewed by them as a dangerous move, requiring additional caution and prudence. Thus it is vital to stress that the mere fact of having received a British commitment did not have a singular and direct bearing on Poland's relations with Germany.

Until March, Beck and his advisers had clung precariously to the hope that by initiating talks over Danzig they could defuse a potential conflict. When in March they realised the full extent of German demands and had simultaneously been approached by Britain, the Poles did not abandon the first in favour of a whole-hearted espousal of the latter. What did happen was that from March onwards the Poles continued with their efforts to reach a *rapprochement* with Germany, by stating their minimum demands, primarily in Danzig, and at the same time indicating areas of compromise. The period March to September was viewed by them as a time of gradual collapse of the belief that this balance could be maintained.

These efforts were nevertheless never wholly given up and this point is further highlighted by the Polish response to the Danzig crisis in August when the Poles made a stand in order to issue the Danzig Nazis a final warning. As their conviction of the feasibility of reaching an agreement with Germany collapsed, so grew their determination not to give in to German threats. The choice had therefore been that of seeking conciliation with Germany on the one hand and determination to reject German demands on the other. Throughout the period April to September 1939 the second became increasingly likely while the first was retained uneasily, but with a growing awareness that it was unlikely to be successful.

It is therefore with surprise that one notes that the British guarantee, on its own account, did not determine the Poles' choice of alternatives in their foreign policy after the granting of the commitment. There was nothing in the British action which could have led Beck to believe that, while the likelihood of his reaching a settlement with Germany diminished, the British would increase their support for Poland. As will be shown below, the Poles treated the British initiative at the outset as a valuable opportunity to open up new financial and supply markets, but not as a starting point in a new line of policy with Germany.

Beck, writing when under detention in Rumania during the war, stated that he:

was fully aware of the fact that this alliance would be a heavy strain on our already tense relations with Germany. Nevertheless, I was convinced that it would be the last effective preventive move, or otherwise a decisive action to

assure a powerful ally for our country should Germany not want to withdraw from the aggressive plans against us.¹⁹

On his journey through Germany on his way to Britain Beck was joined by Lipski. Instructing his Ambassador Beck stressed that the German leaders should be assured that any agreement signed in London would be of a defensive character.²⁰ Beck further developed his idea in a long conversation with Starzeński in which he stressed that Poland could not afford to join Germany in any escapades and that a relationship with Germany, in which Poland would be the weaker partner, would inevitably lead to the loss of Poland's position in the Baltic and also the loss of western territories, and was therefore unacceptable. Beck believed that his trip to Britain was a quest in pursuit of peace, in his perception clearly a move which would restore the balance of power in relation to Germany.

Starzeński wrote that throughout his visit to London Beck was aware of the need not to allow Germany to assume that Poland was joining an anti-German bloc. On arrival in London on 3 April, Beck considered seeing the German Ambassador to Britain but since he was absent from London Beck was forced to abandon this diplomatic gesture.²¹ When returning to Poland Beck was informed of outbreaks of anti-German demonstrations in Poland and sent messages ahead forbidding such actions. Finally, Lipski was once more instructed to stress that the agreement with Britain was essentially similar to that which Poland had with France.²² On returning to Warsaw Beck immediately sought an interview with von Moltke to reassure him of the non-belligerence of the Anglo-Polish agreement.²³

Other Polish leaders shared Beck's conviction that Germany was not seeking a head-on confrontation with Poland. This somewhat optimistic assessment of Germany's aim was based on the belief that Germany and Poland were militarily well matched, if not necessarily in terms of hardware and stocks, at least in terms of determination to fight. Thus on 6 April Marshal Śmigły-Rydz, when discussing recent telegrams from London, told Szembek that he believed that Germany was not prepared for war and that Beck's action would not therefore lead to a military conflict.²⁴ But he also recognised that Germany's foreign policy contained an element of unpredictability and therefore it was not possible to depend on rational considerations when assessing the likelihood of Germany going to war with Poland. General Stachiewicz, the Polish Chief of Staff, expressed a

similar opinion on 4 April when he stated that logically speaking war should not break out because Germany was not ready for it.²⁵ But he, like Beck on previous occasions, presumed that the new element of belligerence so apparent in the German attitude to Poland was the result of Ribbentrop's ascendancy.

Beck was equally reluctant to extend the Anglo-Polish agreement to include Rumania, which would have given it the appearance of a security bloc. In April Gafencu travelled through Poland to Berlin and also visited London. During his passage through Cracow Beck met Gafencu and discussed the British proposal for the extension of the Polish-Rumanian agreement so as to cover the case of German aggression. Beck's aim was to dissuade Gafencu from his idea, and he succeeded in so far as Gafencu conceded that in the event of a crisis there would be an opportunity to consider Polish-Rumanian co-operation. But clearly neither Beck nor Gafencu sought any agreement which would be unambiguously anti-German. As Starzeński noted, a commitment to defend Rumania against Germany would be a negative move and would go against Poland's traditional foreign policy in that region, which aimed at the reduction of Hungarian-Rumanian tension. Polish support for Rumania, whatever form it would take would be interpreted by the Hungarians as anti-Hungarian.²⁶ It was also feared by Beck, that a direct commitment to Rumania, would cause Hungary to throw in her lot finally and irrevocably with Germany. A development of this sort was considered by Beck not to be a foregone conclusion in spite of the earlier Vienna award. Briefly Gafencu appeared to be happy to go along with Beck's insistence that Polish-Rumanian relations should not be re-emphasised by adding the case of German aggression to the contingencies covered by the existing Polish-Rumanian agreement.

On 28 April Hitler announced in a speech that he considered the Anglo-Polish declaration to be clearly aimed against Germany and in breach of the spirit of the Polish-German Agreement of 1934. Simultaneously Hitler repudiated the Anglo-German Naval Agreement. This event seems to have been taken up by Gafencu as an opportunity to return to the question of the extension of the agreement with Poland. On 28 April Łukasiewicz reported that he had been invited by Gafencu who asked him to convey to the Polish government several observations. Gafencu stressed that he believed that Germany would seek a quick solution to the Danzig problem,

most probably with the use of force. Gafencu thus enquired whether presently Poland retained her objection to any agreement with the Soviet Union.²⁷ On 5 May the Polish Ambassador to Rumania, Roger Raczyński reported an official talk that he had had with Premier Calinescu on 3 May. The general impression derived by him was that Rumania was disquietened by developments and sought to reaffirm her ties with Poland.²⁸ Beck did not take up these hints and there are no suggestions that he perceived his policy towards Rumania and Hungary as requiring major reorientation.

Polish-Italian relations had on the whole been good during 1938. This was confirmed by Beck appointing his close friend and fellow Legionnaire Colonel Wieniawa-Długoszewski to the embassy in Rome. But during the Munich crisis the Poles were bitterly disappointed by their not having been invited to the conference. In connection with this it is interesting to note the content of a private letter written to Wieniawa-Długoszewski by Beck on 10 May. In it he instructed his friend to inform the Italians that Poland had assumed no new obligation in connection with the Anglo-Polish agreement. But he felt it was important for Wieniawa-Długoszewski to gauge Italian attitudes towards Germany in view of the forthcoming negotiations (presumably in connection with Danzig).²⁹ Beck wrote to his friend that this investigation of Italian views was 'a question as well as a warning'.

Hitler's speech on 28 April, which signalled an official breach of the Polish-German understanding, should have been noted as such by the Poles. But even at this late date the Poles refused to contemplate the possibility of their worst fears coming true. Beck's first reaction to Hitler's speech was not wholly pessimistic. A certain degree of bewilderment appeared to have prevailed at the Polish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, exemplified by Szembek's statement to Collas, the Greek Ambassador, that Poland expected Polish-German relations to return to their 1919-34 state.³⁰ On 14 May when Lipski, depressed by the present course of Polish-German relations, offered his resignation this was temporarily not accepted by Beck. But a major reconsideration of Poland's foreign policy was unavoidable. Towards the end of May Beck seems to have revised his view of the situation. In the meantime, though there had been no further communications between the two governments, the situation in Danzig had deteriorated rapidly. It was against this background that Beck formulated the future line of approach to Germany.

He proposed to accept Lipski's resignation; the man who had

been associated with the high period of Polish–German *rapprochement*, appeared no longer to serve any purpose in Berlin. Szembek was informed by Beck that he was to be offered the post of ambassador to Berlin. He was to seek a compromise with Germany.³¹ Whereas previously Beck sought direct co-operation with Germany now, in view of all the signs of a possible German action in Danzig, he sought to communicate to Germany a clear definition of Poland's interests. The main line of approach was therefore to seek conciliation, in particular by compromises in Danzig, and if that was to fail, Germany was to be given a warning of Poland's determination to fight.³²

A more precise definition of Poland's aims in relation to Germany was given by Beck on 20 June on the eve of his departure for a brief holiday and in anticipation of a meeting which Arciszewski was to have with Moltke on 21 June. Then Beck stated clearly that his aim was to prevent the escalation of the conflict in Danzig and insisted that such a development was still not inevitable. Beck believed that the present situation had arisen because of 'Chamberlain's action in Munich, France's attitude towards the Czechoslovak issue and Ribbentrop's stupidity'.³³

On 21 June Arciszewski had the long awaited meeting with Moltke in which he outlined the substance of Beck's policy. Continuing Beck's hitherto maintained view that pressure on Danzig was an obstacle to the improvement of Polish–German relations Arciszewski stressed how important it was for Poland that the Danzig crisis be defused and essential Polish rights be respected. In answer to Moltke's enquiry whether Poland was involved in the Anglo-French talks with the Soviet Union, Arciszewski sought to reassure him that Poland was determined to continue her previous policy of balancing between Berlin and Moscow. When Moltke insisted that Poland was indirectly associated with those talks Arciszewski stated: 'Undoubtedly, yes, but this fact has arisen in spite of us and is one which up till now is not an active element in our political calculations.'³⁴

The main emphasis in this conversation remained on refuting any suggestion that the Anglo-Polish agreement reflected in any way Poland's decision to join in a policy of encirclement. A commitment to reach an agreement, direct or indirect, was not seen by the Poles as tantamount to abandoning their previous German policy. That had not changed in essence during the period March to August 1939. The new development lay in the fact that Poland felt it necessary to

pursue simultaneously a new option; co-operation with the western democracies. But as will be shown below this was not an easy exercise. Contact with the British on military and economic levels was not fruitful and by July had not resulted in direct military or financial commitments to Poland. Whatever might have been Beck's fears concerning Germany, he knew by July that neither France nor Britain were prepared to offer Poland financial and material assistance. Staff talks between the British and Polish delegations which had taken place in May exposed the negligible degree of British commitment to a continental war. It is inconceivable therefore that Beck in his dealings over the Danzig issue could have persuaded himself, in spite of all signs to the contrary, that he could count on French and British determination to defend Poland.

Following the granting of the guarantee to Poland, the issue of Danzig became an international one. Daily came reports of tension and incidents taking place between the two communities. But the essence of the crisis was that it became, in effect, an international distraction from the long overdue necessity to consider the real aims of Nazi Germany. For the attention of European capitals was concentrated on the city precisely because of the fear that the conflict would precipitate a European-wide war. It was hoped therefore both in France and in Britain, that by avoiding confrontation over Danzig, the war could be, if not avoided, at least postponed. The Poles, on the other hand, were always aware, and increasingly so after the German demands of 21 March, that the war would not be fought over whether Danzig was to be German or to remain a Free City, but what would be at stake would be the independence of Poland. For they had stated clearly their willingness to negotiate over the substance of German grievances, while rejecting the suggestion that the status of the city should be altered. They believed therefore that by attacking the status of Danzig, the Nazis were rejecting the policy of retaining good relations with Poland. Unfortunately past distrust existing between Poland and Britain, failures in military and financial negotiations and finally fundamental misunderstandings concerning German action in Danzig made it impossible for the two countries to arrive at a common view concerning the vexed question of the Free City.

Within the British Cabinet the question of Danzig was at the root of an insoluble dilemma. On the one hand, there prevailed a fear that a minor incident in the city could escalate into a war, into which

Britain would be dragged because of her commitments to Poland. Thus it was hoped, by all means available, to forestall such developments and in particular to induce Poland to act with caution, prudence, to avoid provocation and possibly also to allow Britain to take over the negotiations with Germany. This attitude was strongly supported by the British embassy in Berlin and in particular by Ambassador Henderson, who throughout retained a strong dislike of the Poles and was a gullible recipient of German propaganda on the subject of Danzig. The British Embassy in Berlin reported frequently the view that Poland had become unduly intransigent as a result of having received the British guarantee.³⁵ This view only confirmed the fears and apprehensions of the Cabinet Ministers. The substance of Polish–German exchanges of March was known to the British as early as 5 April. It had been further confirmed by 14 April.³⁶

On the other hand there was also the realisation that Danzig was probably a mere excuse, as with hindsight it was suspected the Sudeten case had been. Thus, during various Cabinet meetings a fear was expressed that by undermining Poland's resolve to stand firm over the Danzig issue the British could once more be condoning German aggression while at the same time losing possibly the only remaining potential Eastern European partner. This dilemma lay at the root of the ministers' inability to formulate a clear policy on the subject of the crisis, and the British government during the period from March until September 1939 vacillated uneasily between these two dilemmas, fearful of the consequences of a commitment to either and unable to formulate a new policy.

British unease concerning Danzig was communicated to the Poles but only elicited from the Poles a denial that Germany had presented Poland with an ultimatum. On 20 April Beck sent a message to all Polish missions abroad stating clearly Poland's position on the Danzig question. This was outlined briefly and succinctly as:

- (a) the Polish government hold unswervingly to the position that the German population of the Free City of Danzig should be left in complete freedom to develop their internal political life
- (b) the Polish government cannot resign their fundamental rights, or consent that the enjoyment of such rights should be under the control of a third party
- (c) the Polish government cannot accept any unilateral decision in regard to the Danzig question.³⁷

While this message was clearly a warning to Germany, in view of the uneasy relationship existing between Poland and her allies, it was also a warning to France and Britain not to presume to represent Poland's case to Germany.

And indeed, by the beginning of May, having been informed of the substance of German demands over Danzig and under daily bombardment from the British embassy in Berlin where Atollico, the Italian Ambassador appears to have acted as the trusted informer,³⁸ the British Cabinet wavered in its resolve to defend Polish interests in Danzig. On 3 May Halifax presented the case, which was a brief restatement of a report received from Henderson on that day. This was a recommendation that Beck should be induced to show himself conciliatory. The Foreign Secretary thus revealed the quandary in which the Danzig crisis placed Britain when he stated at various times during the meeting that 'it would be dangerous to allow ourselves to get into a position in which the issues of peace and war depended solely on the judgement of the Polish government . . . on the other hand it was of the utmost importance no action or words of ours should suggest that we are trying to whittle away the undertaking which we had given'.³⁹ In a memorandum dated 5 May Halifax admitted that the Danzig issue 'had become a test case and stakes may not be lower than the German attempt at domination of Eastern Europe and the Polish determination to maintain the independence of their foreign policy'.⁴⁰ And since reports had been received suggesting that Hitler planned violent action between 10 and 24 May, the Cabinet on 10 May authorised new approaches to the Polish, German and Italian governments, drawing their attention to the consequences of such action.⁴¹

The responses from Berlin and Warsaw were quite different and it might be worth analysing them not merely to present the cases of the respective protagonists but more importantly because of the influence the British Embassies in Warsaw and Berlin had on suggesting alternative courses of action to the Cabinet.

On 10 May Kennard had an interview with Beck during which he presented British apprehensions concerning developments in Danzig and requested an elucidation of possible Polish action. Beck's enigmatic response was to say that 'the Polish government would have to react in an energetic manner. This would be proportionate to the action taken either by Danzig authorities or the

Reich . . . the Polish government had no intention of intervening a moment too soon but also not a moment too late.'⁴² This response being considered unsatisfactory, Kennard was instructed to have another interview with Beck, which he duly had on 27 May and in which he reiterated the British view that 'irrevocable decisions' should not be taken. Once more Beck refused to commit himself to action in the event of a hypothetical German act of aggression and concluded the interview by enquiring 'if you could state more exactly what preparatory military measures His Majesty's government would envisage in order to reinforce any *démarche* at Berlin'.⁴³

Towards the end of June information came of the possibility of the Danzig Senate voting for the return of the city to the Reich. Kennard was once more instructed to seek immediately an interview with Beck, and was finally recalled to London for consultation. But the Polish government remained equally enigmatic, declaring itself as not being convinced of any preparation on the part of Germany to stage a *coup d'état*.⁴⁴

Henderson in Berlin, in the meantime proceeded to formulate proposals for the resolution of the emergency. On 12 May he wrote to Strang that 'Danzig is a purely German city and quite apart from ulterior sinister motives, it is a fact that even the most peaceful of Germans should desire its return to the Reich. It is the same with the Corridor.'⁴⁵ On 29 May Henderson wrote suggesting:

- taking Hitler's offer as the basis of a negotiation. The solution I would aim at would be somewhat on the following lines
- the Danzig enclave to be incorporated in Germany as a Free City and demilitarised area
- the Corridor to be equally demilitarised
- Poland to receive a free port area in Danzig with completely free access thereto by means of a so-called extraterritorial railway and/or road
- Germany to have an extraterritorial railway or road across the demilitarised Pomorze provinces.⁴⁶

Henderson's hostile attitude towards the Polish side in the argument was confirmed when he stated that he believed that German remilitarization of Danzig was taking place 'against the risk of an incident of Polish making than with a view to early German coups'.⁴⁷

The importance of Henderson's programme was that it reflected that sort of compromise that in other circumstances the Conser-

vative politicians would have supported publicly. After the March crisis it could have served as the basis of Polish-German reconciliation only in circumstances in which Germany would be prepared to renounce all future aggression. And though still seeking to avoid war over Danzig, the British politicians no longer felt able to indulge in the belief that this was the last of Germany's objectives in Eastern Europe. Henderson's reports nevertheless complemented views held within the Foreign Office and the Cabinet, and were avidly read and reported, while Kennard's reports rarely were taken beyond the specialised confines of the Foreign Office and in the event of contradictory advice tendered by Kennard and Henderson, the latter's was invariably considered to be preferable.

Simultaneously it was felt that Beck's reluctance to make Britain a party to his dealings with Germany could result in a dangerous incident drawing Britain into a war. Thus with increased determination British politicians strove to wrest from the Poles a commitment not to take action without prior consultation with the British, a commitment which even when given did not allay British fears and apprehensions.

The fear that Poland might take independent action against Germany finally caused the Cabinet to approve a new move. At a meeting of the Foreign Policy Committee on 4 July Kennard, recently recalled from Poland to discuss the Danzig stalemate, proposed that an exchange of views should take place between a British general and the Polish Marshal Śmigły-Rydz. The purpose of the visit would be also to erase the unfortunate impression created by the recent British refusal to grant Poland unconditional financial assistance, and the generally inconclusive Staff talks.⁴⁸ The man chosen for the task was General Ironside and the official purpose of his visit was described as 'to obtain better information than we had hitherto been able to obtain as to the direction in which Marshal Śmigły-Rydz's mind was moving'.⁴⁹

Ironside's visit to Poland was a social success and his military bearing and sympathetic attitude inspired Polish military and government officials with confidence. He himself was persuaded of the need to aid Poland financially and militarily. From his conversations with Beck and Śmigły-Rydz Ironside derived the impression that the Poles were most unlikely to act imprudently in the face of German provocation in Danzig. Neither had believed that the Senate of the Free City was likely to act independently of Germany and therefore

all action planned by the Poles was on the assumption that a Danzig incident was likely to be a German challenge to Polish security. Ironside's report written on his return nevertheless went unheeded. In his diary he paints a sinister picture of the ignorance and incompetence which faced him when he tried to convey to the War Office his impressions from his visit to Poland.⁵⁰

It is interesting to note that Chamberlain still believed that the crisis over Danzig and the outbreak of war could be averted. Writing to his sister Hilda on 2 July he dwelt on the problem:

It is very difficult to see the way out of Danzig but I don't believe it is impossible to find, provided that we're given a little time and also provided that Hitler doesn't really want a war. I can't help thinking that he is not such a fool as some hysterical people make out and that he would not be sorry to compromise if he could do so without what he would feel to be humiliation. I have got one or two ideas which I am exploring though once again it is difficult to proceed when there are so many ready to cry 'nous sommes trahis' at any suggestion of a peaceful solution.⁵¹

On 15 July Chamberlain, writing once more to Hilda, returned to the subject of Danzig:

I doubt if any solution, short of war, is practicable at present, but if dictators would have a modicum of patience I can imagine that a way could be found of meeting German claims while safeguarding Poland's independence and economic security – I am thinking of making a further proposal to Musso (Mussolini), that he should move for a 12 months truce so that the temperature cools down.⁵²

But as unexpectedly as the tension in Danzig had arisen so it appeared to subside. In July the League Rapporteurs recommended that Burckhardt return to Danzig and briefly it appeared as if Germany was decreasing pressure on the city.

During the tense period Chamberlain considered initiating mediation. Indeed it would have been surprising had he not considered such action. But British involvement in the Munich conference had discredited Britain sufficiently in Polish eyes for it not to be possible to repeat the offer of British good offices. It was nevertheless considered that another country could be asked to fulfil the role of an honest broker. The matter was discussed at the Cabinet meeting of 24 May during which it was revealed that the French opposed the idea on the grounds that Mussolini had already been asked to 'exercise a restraining influence'.⁵³ The Foreign Office too was quite horrified at the idea. The gravity of the situation was

recognised by other statesmen too. The Japanese offered their services to mediate between Poland and Germany. Their offer was firmly rejected by Warsaw.⁵⁴ The Pope too had discreetly let it be known that he was prepared to exercise his influence. This was discouraged by the British.⁵⁵

In spite of having obtained from the British what appeared to be a binding commitment to the defence of Polish independence, Beck evidently continued to be suspicious of both the French and the British in particular over their policies towards Danzig. His distrust of the French and British as well as the League remained and his suspicions were particularly directed against the League High Commissioner. A tentative request was made by the British on 2 June to obtain permission for Burckhardt to negotiate unofficially with the aim of arriving at a joint Polish-German declaration. This proposal was rejected by the Poles. Nor would Beck permit the discussion of the principle of changing the status of the Free City.⁵⁶ On 30 June Bonnet suggested to the Polish Ambassador that it might be worth while making a common approach to Germany in co-ordination with the British. In answer he was curtly informed by Łukasiewicz that Poland considered that neither France nor Britain had the right to make any move whatsoever concerning Poland's rights in Danzig without Poland's explicit permission.⁵⁷

While the Danzig question offers a good picture of Polish-British differences on the question of Polish security and the broader one of German expansion eastwards this was in effect merely a reflection of the lack of trust and understanding which prevailed in spite of the British declaration to defend Poland. The Danzig issue was being played out on the background of other, probably more significant events, namely the financial and staff talks.

The British attitude towards the idea of creating an eastern front while allowing for certain ambiguities if analysed from the point of view of the Danzig issue, becomes clear if seen also against the background of financial and military questions. These were the issues which lay at the root of Polish-British distrust and cast a long shadow over British attempts to suggest to Poland the need for negotiations with Germany over the Danzig issue. The British failure to give Poland satisfaction in the area of military and financial exchanges does go a long way towards explaining the lack of trust Beck had shown when Britain tried to influence his decision making. In the absence of tangible proof of British involvement and willingness to

aid Poland, the Danzig dilemma remained a Polish–German problem and not one into which Beck was going to draw the British. Indeed, past experience both of Polish–British relations and British involvement in Central and South Eastern Europe remained an active factor in Polish considerations in spite even of the gesture of guaranteeing Polish security in March 1939.

4

The military consequences of British involvement in the east

While the guarantees offered by Britain to Poland and Rumania were meant clearly to be political gestures, there remains the important question as to whether France and Britain considered making use of these agreements in a military sense. Since these countries had been discussed in the first place in the context of plans for an eastern bloc of anti-German countries it would have been natural for the question of an eastern front to be debated either simultaneously or at least following the assumption of these unusual commitments. Both Britain and France realised that, unaided, Poland could not play the pivotal role of creating an anti-German front in Eastern Europe, either in the political or the military sense. The inability of the politicians and military chiefs to face the consequences of the dilemma remains a conspicuous failing on their part during the period following the granting of these guarantees to Poland and Rumania.

The military consequences of these commitments to defend Eastern states which were earlier debated by the military chiefs were subsequently analysed only during the second stage of the Anglo-French military talks. On the 8th February 1939 the British Cabinet reluctantly accepted the need to open staff talks with the French.¹ When the second stage of these talks resumed on 24 April the situation had changed considerably since the conclusion of the first, more general, stage which took place between 29 March and 4 April. Two new elements were introduced into the debate. Firstly the question of the British commitments to the East European states and secondly the position of Japan in a future war.²

On 31 March, Captain Danckwerts of the British delegation suggested that the French delegation submit a report on how the

alliance with Poland affected the situation in Europe.³ Prior to the opening of the second stage of the staff talks, the British delegation received instructions prepared by the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee concerning 'The Military Implications of an Anglo-French Guarantee of Poland and Rumania.'⁴ This memorandum was used as a basis of British discussions with the French delegation and later also with the Poles during the subsequent Anglo-Polish staff talks.

The Chiefs of Staff believed that the Polish naval potential would be eliminated by the Germans at the outbreak of the war and Polish ports, primarily Gdynia, would be easily overrun. The defeat of Rumania would mean that Germany would be able to base submarine and naval units in the Black Sea. But since it was assumed that the Soviet Union would remain at least neutral, this would be neither an unduly worrying development in the Black Sea area nor likely to constitute a threat to the Mediterranean. The Rumanian air force was of no consequence nor was it presumed that the Polish one would be able to defend Polish territory. The question to which the Chiefs of Staff addressed themselves in their report was that of whether a German aerial attack on Poland and Rumania would reduce the German capacity to attack Britain and France. This was not considered to be likely unless Germany was to throw the bulk of her air force against the eastern front. Polish anti-aircraft defences were reputedly weak and her industrial plant easy to identify and destroy. Major weaknesses were perceived in the armies of both Poland and Rumania. Polish artillery was weak and the bulk of transport was on horses. The Rumanian army was described in the following words: 'the value of the army is extremely low, the human material is poor and the armaments of varying type'. The Chiefs of Staff summarised their views on the subject of the usefulness of Poland and Rumania in a future European war as:

If Germany undertook a major offensive in the East there is little doubt that she could occupy Rumania, Polish Silesia and the Polish Corridor. If she were to continue the offensive against Poland it would only be a matter of time before Poland was eliminated from the war. Though lack of adequate communication and difficult country would reduce the chances of an early decision. As we have said, no spectacular success against the Siegfried line can be anticipated, but having regard to the internal situation in Germany, the dispersal of her effort and the strain of her rearmament programme, we should be able to reduce the period of Germany's resistance and we could regard the ultimate issue with confidence.

At several points in the report the advisability of securing Soviet aid

was mentioned. It was presumed that the involvement of the Soviet air force could reduce the effect of German aerial attack. Secondly, as neither Britain nor France could supply Poland or Rumania directly it was considered important to secure Soviet assistance, at least in obtaining industrial supplies and armaments.

The French delegation submitted its report on 25 April.⁵ In it they appeared to agree with the pessimistic British assessment of the Polish ability to withstand a major attack. But the report addressed itself to the broader political implications of retaining Poland and Rumania as allies. Thus the French started from the premise that 'the idea dominating German policy seems up to now to have been to eliminate all possibilities of a coalition on her eastern front and to establish her military and economic hegemony on that front'. By attracting Poland to an Anglo-French alliance they would be working towards defeating German plans and policies in Eastern Europe. The French report further developed the thesis that the entry of Poland into a war would draw Rumania and other Balkan states into an anti-German front. An increase in the number of Germany's eastern enemies would inevitably cause the war to become a long one depriving Germany of an opportunity to capture economic resources vital for the conduct of hostilities. According to the French, an opportunity would therefore arise to defeat Italy. The French report was concluded with a major proviso which was stated most emphatically: 'The entry of Poland into a war on the side of Great Britain and France can only assume its full value if it brings about the constitution in the East of a long, solid and durable front.'

The issues of Poland and Rumania, and the possible advantages to be obtained from their participation in a war against Germany were discussed by the two delegations on 26 April⁶ and on 4 May the British delegation presented a report summarising the conclusions reached after the two reports had been analysed.⁷ This, based primarily on the points stated by the French, stressed two important issues that were regarded as vital in assessing the position of Poland in any impending conflict with Germany. It was accepted that no effort could be made to defend Poland itself as it was assumed that she would collapse in the early stages of fighting. Secondly, any advantages to be secured by Britain and France appeared to be confined to gaining time 'to build a strong position in the west and possibly take the offensive'. In view of the weak Polish air force, it was assumed that the German air force would be free to initiate bombing

raids against Britain and France. Though it was not stated so explicitly, the benefits to be derived from an association with Poland were considered to be marginal and were defined as 'useful to us'

- (a) to pick up information
- (b) for the utilization of Polish aerodromes by the Allied air forces permitting attack on Berlin and objectives East of Berlin
- (c) if USSR on our side, Russian air force could use Polish facilities
- (d) if the USSR did not enter the war as an ally, it seems likely that she would supply war material to any of its neighbours.

At the beginning of May the Poles insisted on staff talks with the British. The British military chiefs were forced therefore to appraise the results of their talks with the French. These appeared to be inconclusive and in addition to the fact that there was a marked reluctance to aid fighting in the east, there was also the question of what action did British and French military leaders envisage in the event of Germany holding in the west while attacking in the east.

On 3 May the French and British staff delegations faced this dilemma.⁸ General Lelong of the French delegation reiterated French hopes that Italy could be attacked first. The French viewed Italy as 'the soft underbelly' of the Axis. French reasoning concerning Italy and the eastern front was presented tortuously and was carefully hedged as 'if a solid eastern front were established comprising for example, the forces of Greece, Turkey, Rumania, Poland and possibly Russia, then if Italy were neutral and if Germany did not attack the Maginot line too strongly, it might be possible to spare the forces to go to the assistance of the eastern front, in the form of specialist troops and material'.

British unease on the subject was not allayed. Undoubtedly both sides were aware of the fact that the combination of commitments which had up to that time been established with the eastern states fell short of the minimum required for a 'strong and durable front'. This unease was expressed more strongly during the meeting of the British Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee on 10 May.⁹ Newall, the Chief of Air Staff, pointed to the fact that in effect no action in the west was envisaged. This appeared to be at variance with political commitments undertaken by the government. In addition the picture emerging from the discussions with the French appeared to be far from clear.

At the meeting of the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee on 1 June,¹⁰ General Ismay, Secretary of the Committee for Imperial Defence, pointed to three alternative versions of action which the French had so far presented. First, from their discussions with the French delegation at the staff talks the British understood that the French proposed to do nothing. Secondly, Colonel Petibon, reputed to be Gamelin's confidant, was reported by the British military attaché in Paris as saying that 'limited offensives on land in the west' would be pursued. Finally, it was known that the view of the French General Staff was that all decisions would be made at the time of the crisis and not in advance.

French insistence on viewing Italy as the best possible target of attack when seeking to relieve German pressure in the east had its root in earlier decisions made by the French military and political leaders. These decisions had not been altered by the British commitments to Poland and Rumania.

At the time of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War French politicians confirmed that the Mediterranean was their main area of concern and Central Eastern Europe a subsidiary one. General Gamelin reaffirmed this policy on 8 February 1938 when he stated that the Mediterranean remained the most important object of French military concern.¹¹ During the winter of 1938/9 efforts to reach a *rapprochement* with Germany were accompanied by moves to weaken France's commitment to the defence of Poland. While the first gave only ephemeral results the second was delayed. By March 1939 Bonnet abandoned all efforts to dissociate France from her eastern ally and tried to re-negotiate the Franco-Polish agreement to include the possibility of a conflict in the French colonies.¹² By 1939 the Italians appeared to be undisputedly France's most likely enemy. From the British point of view Hitler's actions in Czechoslovakia and Rumania were seen as the first most dramatic development of 1939. To the French, Italian pronouncements appeared to be more threatening and furthermore Italy's actions in Albania confirmed their fears. Thus France's preoccupation with the Mediterranean and the possibility of Italian action there only served to confirm the majority of French politicians and military chiefs in their determination to assume no new initiatives in Eastern Europe. On 9 April 1939 the Permanent Committee of National Defence confirmed that the Mediterranean and Italian threats to French interests there

would be considered a military priority in the event of a European war breaking out.¹³

It was not only the French who considered the possibility of concentrating on Italy as the possible first object of Anglo-French counter offensives at the outbreak of war. Some British politicians, and particularly Chamberlain, still saw Italy as uncommitted to the Axis.

On 22 June a Committee for Imperial Defence meeting attended by the Prime Minister addressed itself to the subject of 'Anglo-French Action in Support of Poland.' Newall, summarising the results of the staff talks with the French pointed out that the only course of action now considered likely to affect Germany if she attacked Poland was air action. In this connection Newall presented for consideration four alternative courses of action. The Chiefs of Staff were urgently seeking clarification on the vital question as to whether Britain would take the initiative in the air. Unfortunately Chamberlain refused to be drawn and instead directed the committee's attention towards a different aspect of the question. Basing himself on the assumption 'that Italy might very well not be in the war at the start . . . the Italians could be on the look out for any excuse to keep out of the war'.¹⁴ In conclusion the meeting instructed the Chiefs of Staff to review the question of Italy's position at the outset of war and failed to clarify the problem of Anglo-French aerial action in the west, while Germany was attacking eastwards.

On 18 July the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee, acting on instruction of the Committee of Imperial Defence, considered the issue of Italy with reference to the question of support to be given to Poland in the event of a German attack.¹⁵ They interpreted the terms of the enquiry as 'the object of the question is to determine whether an attack on Italy would have greater value as a diversion to relieve pressure upon Poland than an attack upon Germany'.

The conclusions of the enquiry make depressing reading. Analysing the question service by service, it was stated that little pressure could be put upon Italy with forces available. The navy could only raid the Italian coast and this action was considered to be an 'ineffective form of warfare'. Aerial attack would be equally inconclusive unless her industrial capacity be the object and in any case an attack on German industrial capacity would be by far the more effective. On land, the Chiefs of Staff admitted to a depressing state of affairs as

the French were reluctant to take the initiative. The British claimed that it rested with the French to plan an attack on Germany while the French refused to shoulder this responsibility by stating 'that unless the unforeseen occurs, no action could be envisaged until considerable help from Great Britain had arrived on the Continent'. In conclusion the Chiefs of Staff stated categorically that, unless a decisive defeat of Italy could be obtained prior to a German attack on Poland, Germany was unlikely to deflect her troops from her objective. Finally the Chiefs of Staff added a statement which was to be repeated frequently and be espoused by the British military establishment with unswerving conviction. This was that 'the fate of Poland will depend upon the ultimate outcome of the war and that this in turn, will depend upon our ability to bring about the eventual defeat of Germany'. Plans for an eastern front based on Poland and Rumania would not surface again either in the Anglo-French staff talks or in British military committees.

On 24 July the Committee of Imperial Defence discussed the report of the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee of 18 July. There was a certain air of embarrassment about the admission, contained in the report, that nothing would be done to aid Britain's allies in the east. Only Vansittart objected to this, vehemently stating that the consequences of this attitude would be considerable in the Balkans and the United States.¹⁶ But the conversation concerning the eastern front had moved irrevocably to that of aerial warfare and subsequently only that aspect of possible British action was still discussed.

The case of Rumania, a state that had temporarily merited attention on its own account in March, was subsequently only of minor consequence. Rumania was only discussed in connection with Poland; its patent inability to defend her own borders against Germany meant that during discussions and debates concerning the eastern front Rumania was treated as an object of policy rather than a partner. The British and French commitment to Rumania briefly caused the issue to be discussed again on 3 June. On that date the Deputy Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee addressed itself to the subject of 'Rumania's Value as a Belligerent or a Neutral.'¹⁷ The Minister for Co-ordination of Defence put this question to the sub-committee as a result of the Foreign Office's enquiries concerning the strategic implications of retaining Rumania as an ally. Earlier, the 6th Meeting of the Strategical Appreciation Sub-Committee discussed the position of Bulgaria with reference to the hypothetical case of either

Turkey or Greece entering the war. The Deputy Chiefs of Staff favoured Rumania being a belligerent in preference to her remaining neutral. They saw the advantages of the former as:

- (i) If Rumania is a belligerent, it would be easier to take certain measures to rob Germany of Rumanian oil and
- (ii) the invasion of Rumania would absorb 12–15 German divisions and would help to involve Germany in a two-front war.

But to all purposes Rumania was no longer viewed as a possible fighting partner and in the absence of any plans for strengthening the possible Rumanian war effort it is safe to assume that British politicians were content to presume that Rumania would remain neutral and thus deny Germany foodstuffs and oil as well as access to the Black Sea. In any case even the latter point was considered of little importance for it was presumed that the Soviet Union would, at the very worst, remain neutral and thus prevent German use of the Black Sea.

As has been shown earlier, Polish politicians, but Beck in particular, came to see the international isolation in which Poland found herself after the Munich conference, as a serious disadvantage. Prior to the crisis days of March Beck sought to re-establish better relations with the British in particular and his invitation to Britain arranged in February came as a result of heavy hints dropped by the Poles to the British Ambassador in Warsaw and Foreign Office civil servants.

While Anglo-Polish exchanges in the second half of March were conducted by both sides on the assumption that neither sought to antagonise Germany or set their respective foreign relations on an entirely new course, the drama of the international situation subsided from April onwards. Amongst British politicians, the sense of urgency faded, giving way to a weary unease lest the Danzig issue provoke another crisis into which, by virtue of the guarantee to Poland, Britain would be obliged to enter. The question of an eastern front was looked at, by politicians and military leaders alike, without enthusiasm or conviction. To all purposes the subject had been abandoned. But the question of the role that the Soviet Union was to play in British schemes in the east remained unanswered and in due course the government found itself forced to authorise a new approach to the Soviet Union. This nevertheless only confirmed what had already been known, namely that Britain still eschewed

binding political, and in consequence also military, involvement in Europe.

The British guarantee to Poland which brought Poland, at least in appearance, into the British camp did cause Hitler to abandon any further dialogue with Poland. On 3 April a new directive was issued to the military leaders to prepare for war. Codenamed 'Fall Weiss' its object was to prepare for an attack on Poland after 1 September. Detailed plans were to be submitted by 1 May.¹⁸ In relation to Britain, Hitler finally succumbed to pressure from the navy and denounced the Anglo-German Naval Agreement and with it openly embarked on a programme of naval expansion with the aim of isolating Britain.¹⁹ Soon Hitler revealed his long-term strategy. On 23 May he treated his Commanders to an exposé on the merits of waging a war against Poland. In a plan reminiscent of the Ludendorff manoeuvre after the Brest-Litovsk agreement he hoped to knock out Poland and proceed to move his forces westwards.²⁰ Danzig was no longer the issue between the two states, according to Hitler, and war with Poland was consistently planned. There was a fear that this action would lead to Germany being confronted by a fighting alliance of Britain, France and the Soviet Union. But in his exposé of 23 May Hitler already took into account the possibility of isolating Poland and also of drawing the Soviet Union away from Britain and France.²¹ He presumed that the Soviet Union might seek to destroy Poland. Latest conciliatory comments in the Soviet press gave an indication of a change in Stalin's foreign policy as did his 10 March speech of a new course to be pursued by the Soviet Union in European politics. On a diplomatic level no further initiatives were taken in relation to Poland, no further offers were put forward and no response was made to Polish attempts to continue negotiations.

By mid-June 'Fall Weiss' was ready and military plans and preparations were completed for war with Poland by attacking from Silesia and East Prussia and defeating the Poles on the west bank of the Vistula, where the bulk of stores and military supplies were retained, and before the Poles were able to mobilize.²² Simultaneously the Germans pursued the well tried method of waging a propaganda war against Poland in European capitals, one in which Danzig figured as the main object of German claims to Poland. This issue was one with which the British politicians found it very difficult to come to terms and it was therefore a very successful ploy in undermining any nascent Anglo-Polish rapprochement. In Britain it was

still hoped that the resolution of the Danzig misunderstanding could lead to the scaling down of tension between the two states.

In Poland, unlike Britain, the perspective changed dramatically. Beck's pro-German policy, never very popular, increasingly gave rise to doubts, and never more so than after the final dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. Germany's aggressive policy in the Baltic area, confirmed by increased armament of the city of Danzig and the collapse of Beck's 'Third Europe' embracing Rumania and Hungary all finally challenged his belief that Poland could stay outside the scope of German revisionist claims.

In spite of having received a guarantee from Britain, there was little comfort to be derived from the course of Anglo-Polish relations. The distrust and lack of candour which characterised Anglo-Polish relations during the 1930s remained, in particular since the Poles perceived little in British policy which would indicate a conclusive abandonment of appeasement. British flirtations with the Soviet Union, rather than encouraging Polish politicians to believe that Britain was viewing the question of an eastern front seriously, tended to accentuate the distrust which had always underlain Anglo-Polish relations. The question of Danzig rankled with the Poles, who heartily disliked the suggestion that the guarantee gave Britain a right to represent Polish interests in the Free City. But the inevitable could no longer be postponed and Poland had not only to face the possibility of, but also to make plans for, a war with Germany. In this case British military and material aid, if it could be obtained, became increasingly important in plans made by the Poles for a future military conflict.

Polish defence considerations had evolved as a result of two very important influences; the experience of the Polish-Soviet war of 1919-20 and the dictatorial rule of Marshal Piłsudski. Throughout the inter-war period Polish military leaders prepared plans for a possible war against the Soviet Union and in effect no preparations were made for resisting any attack from the west. Blinded by their experience of what was seen by the Poles as a classic military victory over Russia in 1920, and viewing the eastern neighbour as the only possible aggressor, Polish generals considered that the development of Soviet industry and military strength was directed essentially against themselves. This was a challenge to which they readily responded.

The correct lessons were drawn by the Poles from the experiences

of the First World War and Piłsudski appears to have appreciated the fact that in any future conflict Poland would not be in a position to continue a long and economically exhausting war. Nor could the Poles, for geographical reasons, commit themselves to the defence of defined strategic positions. Nevertheless Piłsudski's idiosyncratic and dictatorial control of military decisions in particular, meant that he did not authorise the preparation of plans for the only type of warfare that he knew Poland could pursue, namely a campaign of highly mobile tactical operations.²³ Furthermore, working on the assumption that Poland would not be able to pursue wars on two fronts simultaneously, Polish military thinking concentrated primarily on the development of plans against the major perceived threat in the east. Plans for this were completed in the winter of 1938/9. At the time of the Munich conference only cursory attention was paid to political changes on Poland's western and southern borders, since the Russian mobilisation at the time of the Czechoslovak crisis was considered to be more of a threat to Polish security than the undermining of the Czechoslovak state by Germany.²⁴

Only in 1936 did the Defence Minister, Marshal Śmigły-Rydz, consider it expedient to order the study of a possible plan for a war against Germany. This was developed on the assumption that if Poland was at war with Germany the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia would remain neutral. The first draft was completed in 1936. It was based on the experiences of 1914 and it was assumed that the main German attack would be directed against Poland from Pomerania with an auxiliary attack from Eastern Prussia aiming at Warsaw and the regions west of the Vistula. A possible attack from the south-west through the Silesian Basin was also taken into account, but it was assumed that the Germans would not concentrate their main attack in that direction.²⁵ Proposals for a Polish counter-attack suggested that the main defence should be directed against the possibility of the Germans occupying Warsaw and the industrial region of Łódź. The Poles also hoped to eliminate the possibility of the German forces from East Prussia joining up with those from Pomerania, and also to prevent the attack from the south-western direction from reaching Polish Silesia.²⁶

The most notable failure of Polish military planning was the fact that the results of this preliminary study were not transformed into fully fledged military plans by the time of the outbreak of war in September 1939. Instead, the defence in the east continued to

occupy their attention. Not until the summer of 1938 was work resumed on plans for a western front. Events overtook the Poles culminating in the March 1939 crisis, during which the Germans occupied Prague and renewed their claim to Danzig. The assumptions on which the Poles had earlier based their study were rendered obsolete. The achievement of a Polish–Hungarian border in March on no account compensated for the loss of a potentially neutral neighbour on the southern border. This fact was not even fully appreciated by the Poles. German occupation of Czechoslovakia meant that they could reach Warsaw and the industrial regions of central Poland with far greater ease than if they were to attack from the north.²⁷ The Polish government was forced to accept that the main German attack was likely to be a pincer movement from Moravia and Silesia, aimed at joining with an auxiliary attack from Pomerania and Western Prussia.

According to Colonel Jaklicz, a member of the Polish General Staff at the time of the outbreak of the war, work on preparing plans for a western front continued during the period from March until September 1939 with greater attention devoted to it rather than to the plans for an eastern front, which nonetheless continued to command attention throughout the period.²⁸ This would appear to have been a somewhat exaggerated assessment of what took place at that time. In fact, Poland entered into war in September 1939 with no detailed plans for the western front. As war appeared imminent commanding officers were individually recalled to Warsaw and given oral instructions for the defence of their sector of the front. Their instructions did not include information concerning other units.²⁹ Furthermore, the recollections of General Stachiewicz, the Chief of Staff of the Polish Army in September 1939, contradict any suggestion that the Polish army was prepared for war with its western neighbour. According to Stachiewicz most of the supply bases remained in the western region of Poland and plans for their removal east of the Vistula were not implemented.³⁰ It is apparent that the Polish military chiefs failed to readjust their plans to restrain attack from the east to the requirements of fending off an attack from the south, west and north, at the time of the outbreak of the war. Plans which had been developed were only of a defensive character against the presumed main areas of attack.

Poland entered into war lacking an overall plan for mobilisation, supply, defence and counter attack on the western front. Not sur-

prisingly, therefore, during the intervening period great stress was increasingly placed on the provisional plan for obtaining aid from the western powers. In the study completed in 1939 one of the main conditions for the pursuit of a successful campaign was the assumption that, although Poland would be the first to be attacked by Germany, she would enter into war with France as her active military ally. In plans made in March 1939 aid from the western powers acquired even more importance. As most political leaders were retired military men and conversely there was a high degree of political involvement on the part of the active officers, one has to ask why political action did not match military requirements. The answer to this dilemma can only be found in the Polish conviction that their country was the key to Eastern Europe. The political ideology of the colonels had been based on the claim that Poland had the right to be considered a European power. British approaches to Poland in March 1939 tended to confirm this belief and Beck and his team, in spite of the collapse of the pro-German variant of Poland's foreign policy, still believed that Poland was of consequence in European politics. The military leaders believed that Poland's military potential and their valiant soldiers were a contribution which neither France nor Britain could overlook or afford to lose. Thus in the absence of clear commitment on the part of the western powers, they chose to believe that Poland's determined stand against Germany would be swiftly followed by western action. The idea that Britain and France could complacently plan on the assumption that Poland would succumb to a German attack, without being galvanised into action, simply did not enter into Polish calculations.

The Poles considered it likely that Germany might try to deal with Poland in the same way as she had with Czechoslovakia, namely by obtaining piecemeal approval from Britain and France for revisionist claims to Polish territory. When in March the Polish General Staff was forced to decide on a response to German blandishments it proceeded on the assumption that Poland's decisiveness in resisting Germany would shake the western powers out of inactivity and galvanise them not merely into supporting Polish resistance but also into waging a war against Germany on the western front. Fully aware of the fact that, at that stage, there existed no military plans for either the French or the British to assume military activities with the onset of a hypothetical German attack on Poland, the Poles presumed that their resolve would draw the western powers into action and what

would follow would be that 'effort would be made, to bring about the definition of circumstances in which the alliance would operate and determine a time-table from France to assume an active role'.³¹

The Polish military authorities estimated that upon the outbreak of war they would be able to raise 37 infantry divisions, 11 cavalry brigades and 1 armoured brigade and only 400 planes. At the same time they estimated that Germany would attack Poland with 70–80 units and at least 3,000 planes. In view of the perceived Polish military shortcomings, it became vital for Poland to obtain western military and material aid. According to Jaklicz, Polish military operations at the outset of war were to be mainly defensive. It was planned to withdraw the Polish armies from Pomerania and the Poznan region, with the aim of reducing the length of the front to be defended. In this way it was hoped to gain time in order that on the one hand Britain and France could peacefully mobilise, concentrate and start the offensive and on the other, Poland preserve such military strength as would enable her to move, together with her allies, towards a counter-offensive.³²

It was the Polish side which insisted on the opening of staff talks with the British, a request which caused a certain amount of embarrassment when considered by the Chiefs of Staff. The Anglo-French staff talks had been inconclusive and in any event there were no proposals for fighting in the east. The opening of talks was nevertheless reluctantly approved, as to reject the Polish request would have meant to deliver a strong rebuff at a time when the Poles were under pressure to be reasonable over Danzig. On 15 May the Committee of Imperial Defence issued a memorandum which served as instructions for the British delegation in the forthcoming talks with the Polish Staff officers. This was based on the conclusions so far reached in the Anglo-French Staff talks, and reiterated most of the points which had already been raised by both sides.³³ It had become immediately apparent that the British delegation could not give the Poles any assurance about aid. The memorandum concluded that 'owing to communication difficulties any direct assistance to Poland by British or French forces is almost impossible. Nevertheless, wherever French and British land and air forces are employed, they will give direct assistance to Poland by containing enemy forces.' Thus the British delegation left for Poland with nothing to offer the Poles. Britain had no plans for the effective utilisation of

her East European alliances in the broader context of fighting a campaign in Europe, nor did she propose to defend Poland by means direct or indirect.

The Anglo-Polish staff talks took place in Warsaw during the week of 23–30 May. The British delegation, in accordance with the relative lack of importance which was thus ascribed to these talks by the British government and General Staff, consisted of minor military personalities. The Polish delegation, on the other hand, consisted of officers of the General Staff and was headed by Stachiewicz. Records of the talks show clearly that the Poles were determined to obtain maximum support on sea, in the air and on land. That did not mean that they believed that this was possible. On the whole they tried to present an optimistic picture; one of resolve and determination which was only hindered by the lack of equipment and supplies. But amongst themselves the Poles admitted that Britain was not in the position to aid Poland directly and thus the question of aerial assistance was a crucial one. Instructions issued to the Polish delegation in preparation for the talks stressed the necessity of obtaining British commitments to an aerial attack on Germany.³⁴ The Poles hoped to receive from the RAF both operational and material aid. The first was based on the assumption that the main thrust of any German attack would be directed against Poland, and that relief would have to take the form of immediate aerial attack by the western powers. For such an attack to be effective, the Poles estimated it would have to take place immediately, penetrate deep into the enemy's territory, and strike at important targets, such as airfields, stores and strategic industries. The Polish delegation was instructed to obtain commitments concerning the extent and dates of any proposed counter-attack by the western air forces. It is important to note that the Polish General Staff appears not to have doubted that Poland would succeed at persuading her allies to aid her in a future war with Germany.

The question of aerial counter-attack against Germany was the first that the Polish delegation put to the British when staff talks opened in Warsaw. The British delegation immediately made it clear that the RAF was to be used primarily to defend Great Britain and its offensive role would be restricted, at least to start with, to the bombing of military targets, to the exclusion of industrial and other civilian establishments. The Poles tried to develop plans for the

establishment of forward bases in Poland, which would enable British and French planes flying from French territory to penetrate deep into the German industrial regions and then land and refuel in Poland before returning to France. This proposal clearly had its merits, as aeroplanes in service with the RAF, if flying from Britain or France, would not be able to reach Berlin and then return to their bases, which meant that some of the main industrial areas of the Reich were beyond their reach.

The British refused to discuss the details of the Polish plan, promising to return to the subject at a later date.³⁵ This proposal was indeed considered to be a very attractive one when earlier discussed by the Air Staff but, as will be shown, plans for the implementation of this idea were not developed at the outbreak of the war. The question of aerial assistance was referred to on two more occasions during the staff talks, at the meetings on 24 and 25 May. In both cases the British delegation refused to commit itself to prior action, although on 24 May the Poles were assured that Britain would bomb civilian as well as military objectives in Germany if the German air force was seen to be instigating unrestricted bombing in Poland. Moreover, the British delegation affirmed that such action would be taken even if Britain herself was not attacked or bombed.³⁶

During the meeting on 24 May, Rawlings of the British delegation had to inform the Poles that the sending of ships of the British Navy into the Baltic was not envisaged, nor was it considered advisable to despatch submarines to aid Poland. The main object of the British navy, stressed Rawlings, was that of defending lines of communication with the empire.³⁷

Lack of adequate military stocks and supplies seemed to be one of the biggest problems which Poland was going to face in any forthcoming war. Thus the Polish delegation drew the British delegation's attention to the fact that existing stocks would most probably last not longer than three months. They stressed the need to obtain financial and material aid from Britain, if possible, and from other countries, if the need arose. It was also put to the British that in the event of hostilities breaking out between Poland and Germany, there would be no direct means of aiding Poland. Therefore, Poland considered it vital that she obtain loans and material aid beforehand. The Poles were nevertheless adamant about not discussing the possibility of seeking aid from the Soviet

Union.³⁸ At the final meeting on 30 May it was agreed that there was a need for a special delegation to be sent to Britain to discuss material aid, to be followed by a financial mission.³⁹

The British delegation submitted its report on the talks to the Chiefs of Staff on 15 June.⁴⁰ Their analysis of Poland's strategic position in Eastern Europe drew attention to the fact that the Polish government was politically in a very difficult position. Poland had not secured the co-operation of any of her neighbours in the event of an attack by Germany. In the cases of Hungary and Rumania Poland believed that this would mean the retention of the goodwill of both countries, while a direct commitment to either would automatically lead to the estrangement of the other. In the case of the Soviet Union it was taken for granted that it would maintain a neutral, if not actually a benevolent, position. The Poles steadfastly refused to consider opening talks with the Russians, they accepted, however, that they would have to seek supplies from them, but only in the course of a possible war, and not earlier. The likelihood of the Soviet Union being on the side of Poland's adversary had clearly not been taken into account.

The British delegation had been given a clear picture of Poland's attitude in the event of war breaking out. It was thus reported 'They intend to conserve their forces by retiring to a position which will be both shorter and will give natural facilities for defence. They hope to be able to keep intact a central reserve for use in a counter-offensive especially if the Germans start drawing troops from the east to reinforce the west.' It was therefore known that Polish plans for a future war with Germany assumed an effort on two fronts.

The most important observations of the British delegation were summed up as follows:

'If the Western Powers look upon Poland as an ally and count upon her to make her utmost contribution to the combined war effort it seems axiomatic that any help that can be given is not merely for the benefit of Poland, but is of equal benefit to the Western Powers.' They further stressed that 'to increase the power of resistance of the Polish Army at the outbreak of war needs the provision of cash and war materials now and the organisation of a maintenance service'.

The Foreign Office was acutely aware of Poland's persistent hostility towards the Soviet Union and felt that this would weaken her political and military position in relation to Germany. In a memorandum appended to the report of the staff delegation to Poland, Sir Orme

Sargent stressed the importance of persuading the Poles to improve their relations with the Soviet Union. The question was whether this was a matter which should have been dealt with through diplomatic channels or as part of staff talks. An urgent letter was addressed by the Foreign Office to General Hastings Ismay, Secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence, drawing his attention to this problem.⁴¹ Ismay, in his reply dated 21 July, made it clear that he considered the problem to be primarily a political issue and thus he felt that it should be dealt with through diplomatic channels. The Foreign Office was pessimistic about their ability to exert any influence on the Poles in this matter.⁴²

Mounting tension in Danzig, and a general feeling of unease and bewilderment which this gave rise to in the minds of the British ministers, led to an initiative which though harmless in its aim had unfortunate consequences. This was the decision to despatch General Ironside to Poland.⁴³

Unfortunately it was Ironside's military position that led him inadvertently to inspire the Poles with hope that the British would use their military strength to aid Poland. His visit was a social success and his military deportment and openness encouraged the Poles. But Ironside became aware of the shortcomings of British planning and the need to build up Polish strength. He strongly advised that financial and military aid be granted to Poland. He came to appreciate the need not to undermine their resolve.⁴⁴ Thus in his conversations with the Poles Ironside made optimistic comments which formed the basis of a Polish belief that Britain did mean to aid Poland.

But on his return to London, little use was made of the information that he had brought back and he was not invited to the meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence, nor was his report discussed by the military chiefs. He sought several meetings with Belisha and Gort and clearly failed to draw their attention to the need to develop an eastern front.⁴⁵ Ironside's visit had not been intended as a fact-finding mission but merely to pacify the Poles while Britain continued in the pursuit of her previous line of policy.

In Poland the indirect consequence of Ironside's visit was that it inspired Beck and his colleagues at a time when they had come to seriously doubt British goodwill. While there was nothing in the substance of the staff exchanges or Ironside's visit, the Poles had indeed

been reduced to clutching at straws, if they were not to doubt the course of Poland's foreign policy. By July only full-scale British and French aid could have prevented Poland from either willingly becoming Germany's satellite or being forced into defeat as a result of military action.

Unfortunately the Poles misread Ironside's visit. They considered it to be on a par with the staff talks and appeared not to have realised that its aim was to smooth down the ruffled feathers, to which the failure of the financial and military talks had given rise. Ironside's personal espousal of the Polish case was seen as a British recognition of Poland's right to retain her influence in Danzig and a sign of British commitment to fight for Poland. Both Beck's secretary and his Deputy Minister reported his evident confidence in the British effort. In particular he believed that Britain would use its air force to attack Germany.⁴⁶ Ironside's statements also encouraged the Poles to believe that Britain would automatically enter into the conflict.⁴⁷ Even the fact that the bulk of the British army was not to be stationed in Europe but in the African and Indian territories was considered to be a propitious sign by Beck. Łubieński, on reading Paweł Starzeński's manuscript of his book *Trzy lata z Beckiem*, added a comment in connection with Ironside's visit. He recalled that Beck believed that by stationing British troops in the Near East the British would be showing their determination to aid Poland.⁴⁸ Beck was undoubtedly presuming that the British presence in the Middle East was signalling a commitment to the defence of the Balkans. Needless to say, this idea was wholly erroneous.

As has been shown in the above discussion of the early stages of the Anglo-French Staff talks, it was recognised that neither France nor Britain was prepared to take the initiative in aiding either Poland or Rumania in the event of a German attack. Land and sea operations were not envisaged but aerial action remained a possibility, the consideration of which was deferred. But the Directorate of Plans of the Air Ministry had looked at this question in April and had considered the possibility of establishing forward bases in Poland to be a very attractive idea. On 24 April they presented a paper entitled 'The Operational Advantage which would accrue from the use by Bomber Command of Advanced Landing grounds in Poland in a Two Front War against Germany.'⁴⁹ The Directorate of Plans saw distinct advantages in being able to operate against Germany from Polish territory. This briefly amounted to British bombers being able to

reach, with relative ease and safety, major strategic targets. These targets were listed as:

- 1 The important Magdeburg industrial areas west of Berlin.
- 2 Berlin.
- 3 The very important proportion of the aviation industry centered around Berlin.
- 4 Imported fuel depots and distilleries at Stettin.
- 5 Chemical plants, including the Leuna plant, near Leipzig.
- 6 Electrical power stations.

British bombers flying from Britain or France were at a distinct disadvantage because of the inadequacy of their flight range and secondly because of the probability of anti-aircraft defences and German fighters being positioned at the few entry points, i.e. 'the narrow corridor between Holland and Denmark or the narrow Maginot line battle front between Luxemburg and Switzerland'. As was shown on the map that was enclosed, a bomber flying from Warsaw to Berlin and back would have to fly over 640 miles while flying to Kired or Feltwell its route would be over 1000 miles. Flying from Britain to Stettin and back it would fly 920 miles while if operating from Warsaw it would only fly 570 miles. The Directorate of Plans stressed that the use of Polish bases would mean that Britain 'should gain the important advantage of forcing the Germans to organise and disperse their fighter defences along at least three of the four fronts, viz. the Western fronts, the Northern Baltic fronts and the Eastern frontier with Poland'. The disadvantages focussed on the long-term planning aspect of the proposal. Bases in Poland would have to be prepared prior to war breaking out as it was accepted that it would be impossible to supply them during the fighting. Simultaneously there was the question of the vulnerability of these bases in the event of a 'German air attack or invasion'.

The proposal was considered by the Air Chief Marshal on 1 June. While recognising that 'the implementation of any of our war plans will depend very largely on political circumstances at the time', he recommended that the plan be further studied.⁵⁰ On the 14th of July a conference took place in the Air Ministry Directorate of Plans to discuss the proposal for establishing forward bases in Poland.⁵¹ During the meeting it was accepted that neither the Poles nor the Soviet air forces were able to launch an aerial attack on Germany. The Polish air force was not considered up to the task while Soviet military doc-

trine did not favour independent action by the air force. It was clear to both the Directorate of Operations and the Commander in Chief of Bomber Command that if Britain was to plan for aerial attack on Germany from the east, she would have to station and operate planes herself. The meeting concluded by stressing most emphatically that 'there is general assent that advanced bases in Poland would be of very great value, if our bombers had to attack targets in East Germany'. It was understood thus that, if plans were to be developed, prior Cabinet authority would be required. The Air Ministry referred to the matter for the last time before the outbreak of war on 29 August, when a note was sent by HQ Bomber Command to the Under-Secretary of State, Air Ministry, requesting an early decision by the staffs of the Air Ministry so that preparations could be made jointly by Manpower and Bomber Command.⁵²

The proposal to operate a limited number of bombers from Polish territory had become bogged down in more general questions of aerial policy considered by the Committee of Imperial Defence. Discussing the result of the Anglo-Polish staff talks on 24 July, various members of the committee favoured the Polish proposal for establishing forward aerial bases in Poland. On Chatfield's suggestion the plan was approved 'subject to satisfactory agreements with the Poles, and . . . subject to discussion with the French.'⁵³

On 11 August the Joint Policy Committee meeting discussed aerial action in the event of war breaking out. The conclusions of the meeting were communicated to the French Staff delegation on 14 August. British considerations concerning action in the west in the event of a German attack in the east were narrowed down to two main points. The first was to obtain a French commitment to the British view that an attack on Germany would merely mean the squandering of vital resources and secondly that other allies namely Poland and Turkey should not develop aerial action which would go counter to that decided on by Britain. Though ostensibly four variants of British bombing policy were presented, namely: (a) attack on warships; (b) attack on military objectives in the strictest interpretation of the word; (c) attack on military objectives and capacity; (d) attack on all objects with the aim of reducing military power; it was quite clear that the British Chiefs of Staff were unequivocally in favour of option (a).⁵⁴

During the earlier stages of the staff talks both the British and the French delegations had committed themselves to a policy of not

attacking Germany unless a prior German attack had taken place on their own countries. They furthermore were not to attack objects which could involve civilian casualties. But at the Deputy Chiefs of Staff meeting on 15 August anxiety was expressed not merely lest any British commander act precipitously but also lest Britain's allies would launch an aerial attack which would go counter to this commitment.⁵⁵ This anxiety was further expressed during the Deputy Chiefs of Staff meeting on 17 August and the Chiefs of Staff meeting on 21 August. Although at no stage was it taken into account that British pressure could affect the military offensive and defensive action of the allies, the military chiefs underlined their demand that Poland should be obliged to abide by British bombing policy decisions. In view of the state of tension that existed in the closing weeks of August arising out of the likelihood of a Polish-German war breaking out, and in full awareness of the limited nature of British and French military plans for the outbreak of war, the contents of the discussion on the subject of bombing policy are truly revealing. On 17 August the Deputy Chiefs of Staff authorised the drafting of a memorandum in which they stated;

In the event of a sudden outbreak of hostilities bringing into effect the terms of reciprocal assistance agreed upon between the Polish Government and His Majesty's Government, air operations are likely to play a predominant part in the initial stages. It appears therefore highly desirable that the Polish, French and British Staffs should be in complete accord on the main policy relating to bombardment.⁵⁶

On 21 August the Chiefs of Staff shifted their attention to a new aspect of the hypothetical German attack on Poland, and the likely Polish reaction to such an event. This was that 'from the political point of view, and having regard to the reaction of neutrals it would be to our advantage that Germany should incur the stigma of having initiated attacks on targets involving civilian loss of life'.⁵⁷

In addition to the fear that the allies would take action which would jeopardise Britain's long-term planning for the war, there emerged what appeared, initially, to be minor differences between the British and French plans for action at the outbreak of the war. Although in April both French and British delegations to the staff talks had agreed that aerial action would be initially taken only against purely military objects, towards the end of August the British military chiefs felt this not to be an adequate definition. In their fear lest precipitous action draw the bulk of the German air force over

Britain they sought to limit action likely to be taken by the eastern allies, but also sought an absolute interpretation of what precisely was meant when speaking of 'military' objects. A Chiefs of Staff memorandum dated 22 August defined these in the very narrowest meaning of the word as 'military installations and units which were clearly that to the exclusion of industrial stores and military industrial capacity'.⁵⁸

Talks with the French on the subject were conducted in a visibly strained and curt manner. The French demanded that the British use their air force on the western front. This was rejected by British military planners. When discussing action to be taken on the expiry of an ultimatum to Germany, further differences appeared between the two allies. The British had decided to adopt course (a) for action against Germany. This meant that all necessary preparatory measures on land and in the air would be taken, including the despatch of the Advanced Air Striking Force and the first contingent of the Field Force to France, but no aerial offensive action would be initiated except against warships at sea. The French on the other hand insisted on commitment to course (b). This would have meant the initiation of air action against purely military objectives in the narrowest sense of the word. The French believed this would provide some support for the Poles.⁵⁹ Earlier on 28 August the Chiefs of Staff Committee had requested the government's approval for course (a).⁶⁰ But in spite of this recommendation to the government a certain amount of unease remained as it was realised that British preference was, to all purposes, a commitment to inaction in the face of German aggression in the east.

During the last two August meetings of the Chiefs of Staff Committee on 29 and 30 August respectively, the full extent of Anglo-French hostility concerning not merely the question of aiding Poland, but also over proposed continental action, became apparent. Undiplomatic vocabulary was not used merely in exchanges between the two delegations but recorded in the minutes. As the French suggested attacking German aerodromes Air Marshall Slessor stressed that 'we should have to conserve our resources and not fritter them away at the outset by attacking targets which would not have the effect of reducing Germany's war effort'.⁶¹

On the eve of the outbreak of the Polish-German war, British military chiefs reiterated their commitment to a long-drawn-out war. The outcome of initial hostilities, in this case of a German attack

on Poland, was considered not merely to be of peripheral importance, it was of *no* importance. But the failure of the military plans has to be seen against the background of political developments. Notwithstanding the fact that British military leaders were firmly committed to limited continental action, and that only in the west, the ultimate responsibility for this state of affairs lay with the politicians who perceived no advantage to be derived from co-operation with Germany's eastern neighbours.

On 28 April the Polish Ambassador in Paris, Łukasiewicz started talks with Bonnet with the aim of defining the extent of France's military obligations to Poland. The Polish-French Agreement of February 1921 was supported by a Military Convention in accordance with which France was obliged to aid Poland in the event of an attack from Germany. Bonnet and Łukasiewicz appeared to reach an agreement that went beyond the limits of commitment so far accepted by France. The protocol approved by the French Council of Ministers on 12 May 1939 contained an important declaration referring to the case of Danzig. However, the fact remains that, although approval was given by the French government to the ratification of the protocol, Bonnet subsequently refused to sign it, thus preventing the clause from becoming operative.

The provisional agreement reached by Bonnet and Łukasiewicz was followed by the arrival of the Polish military mission in France for talks which took place on 13-14 May. Led by General Kasprzycki, the Polish delegation was hoping to define the extent of French aid to Poland in the event of a German attack. The Poles were in particular anxious to obtain a definition of *casus foederis* in the case of an attack or alternatively an internal coup taking place in Danzig, but also to ascertain the degree of support the Poles could expect from the French air force.⁶²

The results of the talks were found by both sides to be most confusing and unsatisfactory. General Gamelin, the head of the French delegation, appeared, superficially at least, to satisfy Polish demands for a statement concerning Danzig by committing the French to the defence of Polish vital interests in the Free City. The military protocol was nevertheless made dependent on the signing of the political one, which Bonnet had refused to sign and which was not ratified by the French until 4 September. Nor was it clear whether the French had undertaken to start a major offensive against Germany within fifteen days of an attack by Germany on Poland. Although limited

scope existed for genuine misunderstandings, Jan Ciałowicz, in his excellent book on the Polish–French alliance, has successfully shown that the French General Staff and politicians were not prepared to take upon themselves obligations in excess of those so far assumed by the British. The Polish–French talks had been taking place at a time when no satisfactory conclusions had been reached by the French and British on plans for either the western or the eastern front. The fact that Anglo–French–Soviet political talks were being pursued at the same time contributed to the French reluctance to commit themselves to an unequivocal interpretation of the Polish–French alliance.⁶³

On 20 August General Gamelin took the initiative to resume military contacts with the Poles. General L. Faury was appointed head of the French military mission to Poland. His enquiries as to the extent of French commitments to aid Poland in the event of a German attack merely elicited from General Gamelin an enigmatic statement that ‘Il faut que la Pologne dure.’⁶⁴

Writing in 1951, General Stachiewicz stated that the results of talks with the French and British led him to assume that the French would initiate action against the Siegfried line. A swift and decisive attack on Germany’s western front would, he hoped, force the Germans to station in that region extensive troop formations which would need further reinforcement as soon as the French embarked upon their offensive. Stachiewicz further wrote that it was assumed that the French and British air forces offensive would start ‘*in accordance with their undertaking* (author’s stress) immediately, alternatively at a time of a strategic crisis in Poland’.⁶⁵ It would appear that the Polish General Staff assumed, in spite of the lack of any positive confirmation, that Britain and France could not afford to see Poland defeated by the German forces.

This unfortunate impression no doubt was encouraged by the absence of any clear and frank statements of their intentions by the British. The study of British communications with the Poles during the period April–September 1939 shows that the British Foreign Office and the General Staff were aware of the high hopes harboured by the Poles, but at no time decided to contradict them. There can be no doubt that they feared that a declaration of this kind might oblige the Poles to come to terms with the Germans. And inherent in the British guarantee to Poland had been the realisation of the undesirability of such a development.

In the months after the granting of the guarantee to defend Poland, the British government failed to develop the concept of an eastern front. This failure was merely a reflection of a much deeper incomprehension of the need to redirect British policy in Europe and oppose German aggression. For Neville Chamberlain's government was equally incapable of committing itself to joint military action with France just as it failed to appreciate the need for an eastern front. Lacking political instructions which could have signalled a need for a thorough revision of Britain's military commitments, the military leaders floundered, trying to fit the concept of fighting in defence of Poland into the framework of existing plans for a limited co-operation with France and none in defence of Eastern Europe. The result was that the British guarantee to Poland remained a political bluff devoid of any strategic consequence.

But by refusing to analyse the full military implications of Britain's commitment to Poland, the British government rejected the need for an eastern front in a war with Germany. This failure becomes more striking in view of Poland's patent inability to withstand single-handed a German attack. Thus Britain had committed herself to go to war in defence of a country which was known to be of no strategic significance to Britain. While claiming to recognise the need to prevent Poland being overrun by Germany, the Chamberlain Cabinet failed to appreciate the broad need to oppose German aggression. As Poland was attacked by Germany on 1 September 1939, Britain honoured the letter of the obligation, ignored its spirit and consequently made no effort to benefit from Germany's involvement in the East.

5

The financing of the eastern front

The assertion that, in spite of granting wide-ranging guarantees to Poland and Rumania in the spring of 1939, Britain did not alter her foreign policy towards German expansion eastwards is further substantiated by the study of British financial dealings with her new allies during the subsequent months. In the spring of 1938 an Inter-Departmental Committee addressed itself to the question of the desirability of stemming German economic expansion into Central and South Eastern Europe. Reporting in the autumn the committee admitted that British political influence in that part of Europe could not be maintained without making available grants, credits and loans which, while they could not be justified on commercial grounds, would prevent Germany claiming a monopoly over those markets. As the government was unwilling to sanction the granting of finance on political, as distinct from commercial, grounds so the British government knowingly abandoned any attempt to retain a modicum of influence in Rumania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Yugoslavia.

The events of March 1939 brought the question of the countries of Central and South Eastern Europe once more into the forefront of British Cabinet considerations. The result of these hasty deliberations, which were subsequently modified to accommodate the shifting of the political focal points, was confusing. The British government emerged out of the crisis months committed to the defence of Poland and Rumania, but without a major strategy of how this was to be done. Moreover, the British government remained essentially committed to the defence of peace in Europe and the continuation of good relations with Germany. Nevertheless the growing awareness of the likelihood of war breaking out in Europe

forced British politicians to approve measures of rearmament and the opening of military talks with France. These commitments were confined to preparations for war in the west while planning for an eastern front remained piecemeal and haphazard.

During military exchanges with the French, which had been proceeding since March, it was recognised by both sides that an eastern front, as formed by Poland and/or Rumania would be of little consequence unless Britain and France were prepared to become involved in rearming, re-equipping and joint planning *before* war broke out. But, as has been shown, the recognition of this implication of the concept of an eastern front did not galvanise the politicians into a reassessment of the Eastern European commitments that they had earlier assumed. Neither the Polish ally and even less so the Rumanian one could have been of major military consequence and the issue of the Soviet Union remained unresolved. The desire to continue with the old policies and the simultaneous recognition of the need to initiate a major revision of attitudes towards German expansion eastwards bred contradictory responses. The major weakness of the two alliances, with which Britain burdened herself in the months preceding the outbreak of the war, was that they were of little political and military consequence, while both, but in particular the one with Poland, always threatened to become the cause of a major embarrassment.

The complexities of the European situation, which faced the British politicians in the spring and summer of 1939 did not lead to the initiation of major policy changes. As has been shown British influence and concern over developments in Central and South Eastern Europe had been scant, but the granting of the guarantees to Poland and Rumania appears not to have led to major alterations of policy. The guidelines laid down by the Inter-Departmental Committee on Central and South Eastern Europe still seemed valid and the government, in spite of the need for a revision of military principles, retained its commitment not to make government funds available to these countries. Thus a major question of policy arose. Was the British government committed to fighting in the east? If so, the Treasury's financial dealings with these countries were at variance with the government's policy. If not, the political commitments to Poland and Rumania, conceived in the crisis days of March, were of minor consequence and increasingly so after March, so that the Treasury's handling of the Poles and Rumanians was fully

in accord with the government's policy as pursued consistently throughout the 1930s. The question of financial assistance to Britain's new allies is particularly important in view of the fact that Rumania and Poland both requested credits for rearmament purposes and because of the earlier stated inability of either France or Britain to aid or supply these countries once war had broken out. Thus this matter, like that of military exchanges, in the absence of a comprehensive discussion in Cabinet of the central issues involved, became an indicator of the shifting policy trends.

The question of finance for Britain's eastern allies revealed the great degree of divergence which prevailed within various governmental departments concerning the purpose of these commitments. In the absence of instructions which would have countermanded previous government policy, requests for funds from Poland and Rumania were dealt with solely by the Treasury and in the narrowest interpretation of Britain's long-term economic policy. Thus the Treasury, acutely aware of the burden of the rearmament acceleration programme and the need to conserve resources for war, opposed the granting of credits to peripheral causes. The Polish request for loans and credits, in particular, was looked at from a purely financial point of view, notwithstanding the fact that it was aimed at improving Poland's fighting capacity.

The Foreign Office, on the other hand, had come to see Poland as Britain's main eastern ally. This was so because of the belief that Poland was determined to oppose German aggression. Therefore the Foreign Office became the champion of the Polish request for loans and sought means of imposing this view upon the Treasury.

The service ministers and the military chiefs on the whole opposed the granting of finance to Poland and Rumania. This was not on account of military considerations, for most were disquieted at the absence of efforts to strengthen and make use of any of the potential eastern partners, but because of the fear that these allies could come to compete for equipment and military supplies with the British services. The military chiefs feared that in view of the shortfall in military production the British services would suffer directly if a decision was taken to make funds and supplies available to Britain's allies.

The proliferation of departmental views and policies on the question of the importance of the eastern front was symptomatic of an absence of precise governmental guidelines. The consequence of

this was that neither Poland nor Rumania were to receive any supplies prior to the outbreak of the war and therefore Poland's military performance was further impaired. Britain remained unable to define her objectives in relation to her financial capability. Instead the new allies and considerations concerning the need to fight and oppose Germany were superimposed upon old views and attitudes and this gave rise to indecisiveness and an inability to make full use of new opportunities. British political and, as a result also military, thinking remained firmly wedded to old imperial concepts in which only passing attention was paid to European priorities and in which the question of an eastern front was of particularly little consequence.

New political commitments inevitably implied new economic burdens. The British government, the Treasury in particular, mindful of the events of the First World War, drew its breath in anticipation of a flood of requests from real and potential allies. Britain's initiative in the political sphere made her a focal point for all who feared war. But the burden of the rearmament programme on the British economy was already considerable, and in consequence the Treasury saw itself cast in the role of the custodian of not merely Britain's economic solvency, but more importantly, her ability to wage and win the forthcoming war. On 23 May Simon, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, presented to the Cabinet a memorandum outlining the difficulty the Treasury was experiencing in assessing the priority of various schemes which it was asked to fund.¹ Thus after outlining the present borrowing programme and referring to the

additional expenditure involved by the doubling of the Territorial Army, conscription, Air Force expansion and other defence schemes, the Chancellor emphasised that there was a limit to the rate at which we could raise money, and that this limit to the best of his judgement had already been reached.

The Foreign Office on the other hand nailed its colours firmly to the mast of total abandonment of financial controls. On 21 June Halifax, while discussing the review of legislation limiting financial aid for political reasons to £10 million, declared himself unequivocally in support of unrestricted aid to Poland. His perspective and that of the Foreign Office was considerably different from that presented by the Treasury and he stated;

On the political side we were living in what was virtually a state of concealed war. We were engaged in an attempt to form a coalition of actual and potential allies . . . the time had come when the financial help which we afforded to Poland and Turkey must be regarded from the military rather than from the commercial point of view.

Turning to particular countries the Secretary of State thought that Poland would require a great deal of assistance. It could well be claimed that the whole future of Europe might depend upon Poland being sufficiently strengthened.²

When the full extent of requests made by friendly and allied states was revealed to the Treasury it was found to amount to £51 million and if inclusive of interest it would be £80 million.³ The Cabinet returned to the subject on 5 July when Simon once more drew his colleagues' attention to the extent of burdens on the British economy.⁴ The Treasury's concern was not confined to the state of the economy, but included an awareness that Britain needed to conserve her gold reserves. Roosevelt's failure to amend the Neutrality Act meant that in the event of war involving Britain, United States markets would be closed to all belligerent countries. The dilemma facing the Treasury was whether allied states should be granted aid irrespective of Britain's needs. This was clearly not a policy that the Cabinet was likely to approve and thus the meeting of 5 July concluded that aid should be granted only in so far as British military and financial priorities allowed this. This conclusion inevitably meant that the decision to grant loans, credits and supplies to countries not considered to be of key importance to Britain, was retained by the Treasury. And thus purely commercial considerations prevailed notwithstanding the nature of the requests from Poland and Rumania which were specifically in preparation for war.

Inevitably Rumania was considered to be the least important of the eastern countries. When considering the possibility of German aggression Poland merited more attention. Both countries' requests were nevertheless viewed from the same point of view by the Treasury, as neither had been a major area of economic concern to British tradesmen and businessmen.

During the Foreign Policy Committee meetings on 10 and 11 April the question of credit guarantees to Rumania was discussed. The result was inauspicious as only a £5 million credit was approved but its use was strictly circumscribed. It had to be spent on purchases in Britain and was tied to the satisfactory resolution of a British

request to facilitate oil exploration in Rumania by British companies. In effect Rumania was not able to make use of the credits prior to the outbreak of war.⁵ When discussing the Rumanian request for funds, the Cabinet Ministers, on the whole, maintained the attitude asserted in 1938, namely that unless Britain was prepared to launch a major programme of investment in Rumania, her efforts to displace German commercial and in consequence also political influence would be of no avail. Thus in April, merely days after having declared a guarantee to Rumania, the British government's unwillingness to forestall German peaceful penetration of South Eastern Europe was confirmed.

The Polish case was more complex because of the inordinate importance to which this country had been elevated in the vague concept of an eastern front. Unlike Rumania which was potentially unlikely to defend her own territory and because of the British ministers' unwillingness to enter into agreements with the Soviet Union, Poland was proffered as the main eastern partner and as the cornerstone of Britain's efforts to stem German expansion.

Very early on, the Foreign Office perceived the need to strengthen Poland economically. On the eve of Beck's arrival in London in April, a memorandum was prepared by Makins concerning the possibility of financial aid being requested by the new allies. Makins had made enquiries within the Treasury and it was indicated to him that such demands would not be welcome. Waley, the Principal Assistant Secretary in charge of the division of the Treasury dealing with overseas finance, informed the Foreign Office that 'he hoped Colonel Beck would not be encouraged as there was no money to spare for Poland'.⁶

In its opinion, the Foreign Office was influenced by the very strong views on the subject held by Kennard. In a report dated 22 April he outlined the financial difficulties facing Poland, which were compounded by the state of semi-mobilisation which had been maintained since March. In his report he considered that the additional burden was costing the Poles £2,300,000 per month. He further argued that:

surely now is the time for the financial weapon to be used to the full, not to bolster up timorous and half-hearted peoples, but to enable the one really determined nation in this part of the world to keep an eastern front in being during these early months in which German strategy is likely to endeavour to knock them out of the ring.⁷

Kennard's report made a very strong impression on Cadogan, who

approached the Treasury, the Board of Trade and various service ministries with a view to ascertaining their opinion on the possibility of granting extensive aid to Poland.⁸ On 5 May Cadogan received answers to his preliminary enquiries.

The most important was the communication from the Treasury. Foreign Office heads were astonished to see that the Treasury had decisively rejected the proposal to grant loans to Poland. Their refusal was based on two arguments. The first, which was summarised in the words 'The feeling that we are encircling Germany by paying for Polish mobilisation would be inevitable', was clearly the Treasury's interpretation of the British government's foreign policy aim. Secondly, the Treasury pointed out that it would be necessary to seek new legislation at a time when Britain was experiencing financial difficulties. The Treasury emphasised that both British military expenditure and non-military government expenditure would have to be reviewed if the request by Poland was granted consideration. The Treasury concluded that 'our own losses of gold continue to be most disquieting indeed and we have a transfer problem of our own which we are at our wits end to resolve'.⁹ The Foreign Office was clearly unimpressed by the arguments presented by the Treasury. Speaight of the Central Department objected to the Treasury's interpretation of policy requirements and priorities, and he felt that the introduction of additional legislation could hardly constitute an insurmountable obstacle.

The answer that was received from the Board of Trade showed it wholly sympathetic to the Polish case. W. B. Brown of the Board of Trade stated that he considered the Polish request to have considerable merit in view of the fact that the money would be spent on strengthening Poland against Germany. Other proposals put to the Board of Trade had been for 'attempting to buy off Bulgaria or . . . to buy Greek and other oriental tobaccos for which we have no present use in this country'.¹⁰ The Board of Trade also pointed out that there should be few legal obstacles to the granting of aid to Poland. In the most extreme case they envisaged that legislation could be introduced for the granting of a government loan to the Polish government.

Admiral Cunningham informed Cadogan that in view of the fact that the Admiralty saw no way by which direct aid could be given to Poland once hostilities began, it would be only prudent to offer some form of assistance in anticipation of such aggression. He

finally stated that 'it is believed that Poland is in a state to make a good resistance and it is therefore in our own interest to support her financially or in any other way'.¹¹ General Gort, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, also replied favourably to Cadogan's enquiries. He admitted that the military precautions taken by Poland were proving a heavy burden and warned that 'if the tension lasts financial considerations may have the effect of reducing Poland's readiness for war. This would be most undesirable.'¹² Newall, the Chief of the Air Staff, fully endorsed the views put forward by the General Staff and Naval Staff.¹³

On 23 April the British government received a tentative approach from the Polish government in the form of an enquiry as to whether the principle of granting financial assistance would be considered.¹⁴ The decision to grant financial assistance to Poland rested solely in the hands of the Treasury officials and belatedly the Foreign Office became aware that it had no means of influencing it. Furthermore, it was known that the Treasury intended to apply to the Polish case the narrowest of commercial and fiscal considerations. Underlying the present negotiations for funds to Poland and indeed also Rumania, was the question of past commercial contacts. Unfortunately trade relations between Poland and Britain had not been good during the first months of 1939. On 6 March the Polish government announced to the Board of Trade a proposal for the reduction of quotas for the import into Poland of goods described as luxury goods. The new legislation was intended to safeguard Poland's reserves of convertible currency but it encroached upon rights that were guaranteed to British traders by the Anglo-Polish Trade Agreement of 1939.¹⁵ Notwithstanding Poland's need to conserve its resources the issue cast a long shadow over Anglo-Polish commercial relations.

On 24 May the Foreign Office informed Kennard of the granting of the contract for the building of an electric grid in Poland to the French company of Alsthor. The British had in fact taken for granted that it would go to the English Electric Company.¹⁶ Acting on instructions from the Foreign Office, Kennard made enquiries in Poland and was informed by Jan Wszelaki, the Director of the Economic Section of the Polish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, that the decision had been made on the merit of the French tender. Although he dismissed the suggestion that it was made on political grounds, Wszelaki took the opportunity to stress that the French government had been most forthcoming and helpful in the manner

in which they dealt with Polish requests for financial assistance. He cited the example of the next instalment of the Rambouillet loan being paid to the Poles in advance of the set date, as a particular case in point.¹⁷ The Foreign Office was aware that the Treasury would be unlikely to overlook this unfortunate decision.

Within the Polish government and military circles there existed conflicting views on the subject of the British guarantee and its usefulness. Colonel Koc, the director of the Bank Handlowy and later head of the Polish financial mission to London, reflected the belief that Britain recognised the need for Poland and assumed that Britain would not only treat Poland as a major European partner in future strategic plans but also grant extensive financial aid. He stated in a conversation he had with Szembek that Britain was now expected to cover the financial costs of Poland's mobilisation, and would also have to support extensive investments which would improve Poland's fighting potential. In his opinion Poland would then be able to rearm and prepare stockpiles of raw materials. The view was succinctly defined in his words as: 'It is in Britain's interest that Poland be strong.'¹⁸ The President of Poland, Mościcki, also considered that British investment and aid could be confidently anticipated. He assumed that this would be used to improve communications and to bring up to date the technology and equipment of the armed forces. Like Wszelaki he spoke of stockpiling raw materials but he, like a number of other prominent Poles, hoped to take advantage of the 'run' on Poland generally to improve Poland's economic position.¹⁹

While at times it appears as if the Poles were strongly motivated by a mercenary desire to take advantage of Britain's temporarily helpful attitude towards Poland, it is important to stress that most Polish politicians chose to believe that Britain did genuinely look to Poland to build up a vital eastern front. At the same time, Poland's economy was being ruined by her state of semi-mobilisation for war. The Minister of Finance, Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski, confided to Szembek on 26 April that the Polish economy was likely to become bankrupt unless a British loan was forthcoming.²⁰ Among the military leaders the general opinions being expressed were that it would be best to go for a confrontation with Germany before Poland's state of preparedness was affected by her economic difficulties and most importantly while Britain was on Poland's side.²¹

In view of the above it is surprising therefore to note that the first

enquiries concerning a loan were not made by the Poles, but by the British Foreign Office. Whether Beck presumed that the British should have been first to offer Poland assistance, or whether he did not, as has been earlier suggested, perceive the agreement with Britain as more than a political signal of warning flashed at Germany, is difficult to ascertain. In any case Beck did not raise formally the question of a loan until 10 May while in fact the councillor of the British Embassy in Warsaw, Norton, had on 21 April made informal soundings as to why the Poles had not made approaches for funds. During the conversation with Norton, Wszelaki had implied that 'undoubtedly the state's financial circumstances were strained and if present new expenses are maintained *à la longue*, they could lead to undesired results in the budget and finances'.²² Implicit therefore was a suggestion that Poland did not necessarily expect that the present state of tension would be maintained. But by the beginning of May Beck was forced to reconsider this belief for Raczynski was instructed to make a formal request 'for financial assistance to cover necessities, associated with increased rearmament and which would lead Poland to full war preparedness in a short time'.²³ The official request for the opening of financial talks was put to Strang by Raczynski on 12 May.²⁴

Polish demands were extensive and amounted to the approximate sum of £60.5 to £66.5 millions, of that amount £14 to £24.5 millions was requested for industrial purposes, including supplies to factories and key industries and in order to proceed with the programme of electrification. £18 million was needed for defence materials, munitions and spare parts. In addition the Poles hoped to obtain £24 million in convertible currencies or gold for the purchase of materials in countries other than Britain. The Poles proposed to repay the loan over a minimum period of forty years although it was realised that the cash loan would cause the biggest problem of repayment.²⁵ The demand represented the maximum expected by the Poles, for Szembek noted that in reality it was presumed that £20 million would be obtained after due negotiations had taken place with the British. He hoped that £10 million worth of credits would be granted for the purchase of supplies, armaments and raw materials, and the remaining £10 million would be made available to the Poles in cash or gold for purchases of materials which Britain could not supply but which could be obtained on the world markets.²⁶

The British response to the Polish formal request of 12 May was discouraging. While stating their willingness to open negotiations, the Foreign Office communiqué to the Poles stated clearly: 'His Majesty's government could not agree to financial credits or credits for purchasing material, except to the extent that such credits are required for goods or materials produced in the United Kingdom.'²⁷ The Polish conviction that Britain did not appreciate the seriousness of the situation was confirmed in Beck's instruction to Raczynski on 26 May. Beck informed his Ambassador to point out to the British the need to 'redistribute mutual hardships and obligations arising out of the guarantee'.²⁸ In this atmosphere of emerging conflicts of interpretation over the nature of the relationship a Polish financial mission was sent to Britain.

The issue of financial assistance to Britain's allies was inextricably connected with that of Britain's ability to supply them with the necessary goods. The British politicians, mindful of the need to conserve the gold reserves, were not prepared to grant either loans in gold or convertible currencies. The added difficulty was that Britain's own military services were in desperate need of new equipment. Rearmament programmes had only just been accelerated in the spring, so the output of the munitions and supplies industries was not even keeping up with British demand in May. Few surpluses therefore existed for allied countries. Inevitably, when considering the requests for financial assistance, British politicians were forced to consider whether they could spare the goods. An undesirable situation could have arisen whereby foreign countries would be competing with the British services for the few stocks and armaments, then being supplied by the industries.

This problem was faced in its full complexity on 13 June when, on the direction of the Minister for Co-ordination of Defence, a sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence was set up to examine requests for war material made by allied countries. It became known as the Allied Demands Sub-Committee.²⁹

The Committee for Imperial Defence had always maintained a list of countries in order of priority of importance for British strategic plans, but the changing situation in Europe and in particular Britain's initiative in guaranteeing Poland, Rumania and Greece, altered the previously approved list, the last one of which was dated 1 December 1938. Thus on 20 April 1939 the Committee for Imperial Defence addressed itself to the question of 'The Order of

Priority of Countries Requiring Armament from the United Kingdom.³⁰ The debate based itself on a memorandum submitted by the Foreign Office in which it sought to revise Poland's position in the list of priorities. All service ministers agreed that the demands made by allied countries were interfering and would continue to interfere with their own programmes. It was also felt that excessive demands were being made on Britain. Greece and Rumania had presented their orders, the Polish one was still awaited. In conclusion, it was agreed to revise Poland's position in the list of priorities and a new list was drawn up as follows: Egypt, Iraq, Belgium, Portugal, Turkey, Greece, Netherlands, Rumania, Poland, Yugoslavia and Afghanistan.

The first meeting of the Allied Demands Sub-Committee took place on 21 June. Two memoranda were primarily discussed, one from the Treasury and the other from the Foreign Office. The Foreign Office memorandum referred to the conclusion of the Committee of Imperial Defence meeting on 20 April, in which Poland was placed as ninth on the list of priorities. This time the Foreign Office drew attention to the political aspect of the situation and recommended that on this basis Poland should be given first place on the list of priorities. It justified its assessment by pointing to the war of nerves waged against Poland which necessitated British help if Poland were not to collapse. If this was not done, the Foreign Office feared, the effect of such a defeat would be 'disastrous to our whole policy of encouraging resistance to aggression among Germany's eastern neighbours'.³¹ The Foreign Office concluded its analysis of the need to supply Poland by stating emphatically that 'only a considerable measure of financial and material support from France and Great Britain can save Poland from ultimate surrender'.

It is important to note that on the list of priorities presented by the Foreign Office Egypt and Turkey occupied second and third place respectively. Poland was placed first and Rumania fourth. Rumania, in spite of her doubtful fighting capacity, was rated highly by the Foreign Office because of the need to deny Germany access to Rumania's oil but also because of 'her geographical position at the mouth of the Danube and at the junction of Poland, the Soviet Union and the Balkan states'. Thus the need to strengthen the eastern front was considered by the Foreign Office to be sufficiently important to take precedence over traditional areas of British interest in the Mediterranean and the routes to India.³²

The Treasury memorandum on the other hand concentrated exclusively on the problem posed by the British rearmament programme. It was pointed out by them that the British holdings of dollar securities had been dwindling at a disquieting rate. Britain was also rapidly losing gold and thus it was stated that 'the more gold we lose, the shorter the period for which we shall be able to continue war'.³³ The Treasury proposed that credits for foreign countries should be limited to goods to be purchased and produced in Britain. Dollar loans, they suggested, should be refused. To Poland, the Treasury was prepared to consider the granting of credits to a maximum value of £5 million. They let it be known that they had deep apprehensions about the use to which these credits would be put.

During the first meeting of the Allied Demands Sub-Committee it became apparent that the assistance of the Chiefs of Staff was required if a decision was to be made as to which of the allies should be supplied with military aid and to what extent this should be done at the expense of British rearmament programmes. It was also decided to draw in the French and possibly commit them to sharing the burden of military aid to the eastern allies. At this stage it became apparent that there was no information as to the strategic importance of each of the countries that had submitted requests for aid. The meeting closed having focussed on the political, financial and strategic complexities of the question of supplies, and priorities of various allies.³⁴ Thus, decision making promised to be difficult and fraught with conflicting interpretations as to where amidst them lay Britain's interests.

On 26 June the Allied Demands Sub-Committee gathered for an informal meeting to discuss the Turkish and Polish requests for financial and material aid. Two memoranda were presented, the first was a memorandum by the Deputy Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee on the subject of 'The Relative Strategic Importance of Countries Requiring Arms from the United Kingdom,' while the second was a draft note from the Foreign Office on the subject of 'Financial and Material Assistance to Foreign Countries'. The first memorandum, that of the Deputy-Chiefs of Staff, argued that since the western front was going to be formed by France and Britain it would be 'unsound to delay making good our own deficiencies except in so far as it is essential to strengthen the eastern front'.³⁵

The content of the memorandum immediately reveals the degree of confusion that existed concerning Britain's obligations towards Poland and Rumania. Thus the countries considered essential to the creation of an eastern front were Egypt, Poland, Rumania, Greece and Turkey. Whereas British interest in Egypt, Turkey and Greece reflected her concern over the Mediterranean and her routes through it, the inclusion of Poland and Rumania into this strategic analysis is highly anomalous. The Deputy Chiefs of Staff were specific as to what was the position of the three Mediterranean countries in relation to British strategic interest. Greece was important in relation to Turkey. Turkey merited major consideration because of the need to maintain a pro-British bloc in the Middle East, the Mediterranean and the Balkans. The memorandum stated that Turkey was crucial in the Mediterranean and extensive supplies were to be made available to her. The military strongly emphasised the need not to be parsimonious as they reminded that:

The view has often been expressed that in 1914 the expenditure of a few million pounds would have prevented Turkey entering the war against us and we should have subsequently saved untold expenditure in lives and money. With Italy now potentially hostile, we feel that no financial consideration should stand in the way of ensuring that Turkey is with us in the event of war.

The defence of Egypt was considered to be on par with that of British territory, so important was she in relation to major imperial routes, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Suez Canal. But the inclusion of Poland and Rumania into this strategic concept of an eastern front, essentially an eastern Mediterranean front, was difficult and unrealistic. The defence of Poland and Rumania did not imply the defence of British interests and would furthermore mean a war with Germany whereas Egypt, Greece and Turkey were in need of strengthening against Italy. The degree of confusion that existed over the vague concept of an eastern front which had been bandied around since March was not resolved. Thus the Deputy Chiefs of Staff found themselves unable to comment on exactly what was required of Poland and Rumania, and confined themselves to commenting on Britain's ability to aid any war effort there. The military leaders did not recommend the granting of extensive munition supplies to either country. The first reason against this was the inability to supply these countries during war but the second was a conclusive

statement that 'such arms as we could supply in the near future would not be adequate to increase materially the capacity of either Poland or Rumania to defend themselves'.

The Foreign Office now repeated its earlier recommendation that financial resources should be made available to Poland as the only means of giving substance to the declaration.³⁶ On political grounds it was advised that Poland should be granted assistance amounting to no less than £20 million.

The informal meeting of the Allied Demands Sub-Committee found it once more very difficult to reach any conclusion on the basis of the two memoranda which were so very different in their recommendations. Apart from dealing with technical arrangements for talks with the Polish and Turkish delegations, the only conclusion of substance was the decision to instruct Waley of the Treasury to meet the Polish and Turkish delegations to discuss the extent of their demands.³⁷

The result of the Sub-Committee deliberation was that a memorandum on Exports Credits for Turkey and Poland was prepared for discussion at a meeting of Ministers to take place on 28 June. Decisions concerning supplies to allies needed to be made urgently for it was pointed out that an Export Credits Bill was to be presented to Parliament soon and if it was to complete all formal requirements during the present sitting it would have to be concluded at the latest on 30 June. The memorandum was intended to assist the ministers in reaching a final decision. It therefore outlined all the facts that had to be taken into account.

With reference to the Polish request for loans and material aid the Allied Demands Sub-Committee recommended that a certain quantity of armament and military supplies should be granted. The maximum that they considered could be given away without reducing the British effort was listed as follows: Naval Supplies – £142,000 to be completed by June 1940; Military supplies – £300,000, mainly uniforms; and finally Air Force supplies – £1,418,000 in the form of 100 single engine Battle bomber planes and 6 Hurricane fighters. It was also recommended that financial provisions in the form of credit guarantees be made to enable Poland to pay for stipulated materials. These were £1,875,000 in non-interference stores, £1 million for the purchases of raw materials from the United Kingdom and a similar amount for miscellaneous Polish imports and £3.5 million for

industrial supplies. The recommended credit guarantees totalled just under £7.5 million.

A new element was added to the discussion of the desirability of granting loans to Poland when the Allied Demand Sub-Committee memorandum referred to the Treasury's demand for a readjustment of the Polish fiscal system. This point subsequently became a prominent feature of the Anglo-Polish financial talks. The Treasury recommended that Poland should be made to raise £22 million by an expansion of internal credits. The Treasury noted in this connection that there had recently been no increase in prices in Poland, leaving scope for the expansion of internal demand by the creation of additional credit. The Sub-Committee memorandum concluded that members were in agreement with the proposal to grant £7.5 million with the balance made up by a straight cash loan, or alternatively, supplies of raw material from the Empire.

The decision to grant a loan to Poland was made by the meeting of Ministers on 28 June.³⁹ Basing themselves on the recommendation of the Allied Demands Sub-Committee the Ministers approved the granting of credits for the purchase of armaments to be made up of: Military supplies (£300,000) and Air Force supplies (£1,700,000). In addition it was agreed to grant to the Poles credits for the purchase of raw materials from the United Kingdom (£1,500,000), industrial supplies (£3,500,000) and industrial credits to the value of £1,000,000. The contentious question of a cash loan failed to secure agreement at the meeting and it was decided by the Ministers to refer it to the Treasury, pending the opening of talks with the French aimed at sharing with them the burden of aid to be granted to Poland. However, an important stipulation was approved by the meeting which stated conditions under which a cash loan would be made to the Poles. In this case the Treasury succeeded in its insistence that a cash loan 'would be made on the condition that Poland should take steps to deal with her currency position and should agree to a reasonable settlement in regard to the Anglo-Polish Coal Agreement'.⁴⁰

Thus Simon succeeded in imposing a virtual veto on a decision which, hitherto, it had been agreed had to be based on political and strategic as well as financial considerations. The Treasury assured for itself final say in this matter mainly because of the government's implicit restriction of the final criteria for any decision on this matter

to a narrow view of the Polish economy, which had been inspired by the fear that the cash loan would be spent on maintaining what was seen as an unreasonably high value of the Polish currency, which was still tied to the gold standard. Since no detailed plans were made by the meeting of Ministers for the readjustment of what were seen as deficiencies in the Polish economic system, the Treasury would be able to impose its own judgement in the matter.

The Foreign Office, which continued to advocate a higher loan to Poland, of at least £15 million, was unable to stop the Treasury from tying the granting of a loan to issues of trading relations, as witnessed by the reference to coal quotas.⁴¹ It remains to be noted that a singular feature of the whole process of the decision-making in this matter, as well as the manner in which the Treasury retained its veto by virtue of its power to establish the conditions for the cash loan, was that the Cabinet did not consider the issue of sufficient priority to support the Foreign Office in the political recommendations it had put forward.

During the Anglo-Polish Staff talks it was agreed to send to Britain a Polish military mission with the aim of discussing the material aid which the Poles hoped to obtain from Britain. This mission was to be followed by a delegation which would put forward the Polish requirements in terms of credit guarantees, credits for purchases in Britain and cash loans. On 3 June the Foreign Office informed Kennard of the apprehension of the Committee of Imperial Defence concerning the military mission's proposed arrival in Britain. It was pointed out that the Poles were likely to enquire about the intended French and British military action in support of Poland and that these enquiries would come at a time when the joint talks had yielded no clear answers to the questions of aiding the creation of an eastern front and the proposed action on the western front.⁴²

But even prior to the arrival of the mission, which was expected in Britain on 12 June, serious disagreements arose between various government departments. Following a message from Kennard giving the Foreign Office information on the membership of the Polish mission, Vansittart minuted that, at the meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence, which took place on 4 June, and which was discussing the reception of the Polish mission, the Treasury showed itself to be violently opposed to the granting of any credits to Poland. Waley, representing the Treasury was described by Vansittart as 'uncompromisingly hostile' and was quoted as asserting that, 'The

Chancellor was strongly opposed to giving Poland any loan, as regards export credits, these must be extremely limited and should not be granted except in respect of war materials which could be delivered by October.⁴³

During the subsequent meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence on 8 June, it was admitted that there existed serious difficulties in acceding to the kind of requests which the Poles were likely to present. The most important difficulties were summarised as 'the absence of policy in respect of the degree of priority which was to be given to our own programme in relation to the various and considerable requirements of many other friendly countries'.⁴⁴ The difficulty clearly applied not only to the Polish request, since all the allied and friendly as well as the Commonwealth states were expected to put in requests for financial, material and military aid. Until decisions concerning the priorities of these countries in relation to each other and to the British requirements were made, the Committee of Imperial Defence was unable to reach any conclusions. The Allied Demands Sub-Committee, although set up with the aim of conducting the thorough analysis that the complexities of the problem required, remained nevertheless a relatively minor committee and its powers were purely advisory. During the period preceding the outbreak of war it remained the only forum on which the differing views and assessments of the problem as seen by the Treasury, Foreign Office and the Chiefs of Staff, were discussed. However, its powers over expenditure remained non-existent, while the primacy of the Treasury in the field remained effectively undisputed.

The dilemma posed by allied demands for munition supplies was made more acute by the fact that, until financial talks were completed, the decision to sell military supplies would only be provisional. Thus having anticipated difficulties stemming from the arrival in Britain of the Polish military mission which was to be followed by a far more important financial mission to discuss what were already known to be demands for extensive grants and credits, the Chiefs of Staff required clearer political directives on the problem. The Cabinet nevertheless did not discuss the matter of priorities and it rested with each department to co-ordinate its interpretation of the priorities in the Allied Demands Sub-Committee with the Treasury, whose final decision in matters affecting expenditure and loans could not be overruled.

The arrival of the Polish military mission led by General Rayski, Head of the Polish air force, was thus greeted with little enthusiasm, a great deal of apprehension on the part of the Chiefs of Staff, and undisguised hostility on the part of the Treasury. The doubts surrounding their visit were duly communicated to the Poles. On 14 June, Rayski had an informal meeting with Colonel Martin who had been military attaché to Warsaw. Martin cautioned the Poles against raising their hopes too high. He warned them that the general public opinion was against giving Poland aid which it was feared would be lost if the Poles were defeated by the Germans.⁴⁵ Indeed far from being merely a general public opinion, this view was clearly held by the Chiefs of Staff, as expressed in their memorandum discussed at the informal meeting of the Allied Demands Sub-Committee on 26 June.⁴⁶

On 1 July Rayski reported that no progress had been made in discussions concerning the purchase of materials for Poland. He further complained of the general unhelpfulness of the British, and quoted the example of having failed even to obtain a clear answer to the enquiry as to the calibre of the British artillery. He finally pointed out that all decisions were being made conditional on the outcome of the financial talks which were proceeding at the same time.⁴⁷ The most urgent Polish request was for aeroplanes. Thus at a meeting which took place at the Air Ministry on 30 June, provisional agreements were reached concerning the purchase of 14 Hurricane fighter planes and 100 single-engine Battle bomber planes. The Polish delegation was nevertheless warned that 'the supply of the above is dependent upon the amount of credit or loan to be granted by the Treasury'. If the loan negotiated by the Poles turned out to be lower than expected, the order would be reduced accordingly.⁴⁸ The Poles, who considered themselves to be the next most likely object of German aggression in Europe, protested at the fact that their requests received no priority. Rayski reported that their proposals were dealt with without any sign of urgency and were undistinguished among a number of applications from Bulgaria, Greece and other countries.⁴⁹ The Polish negotiations for military supplies were delayed in their conclusion as the financial talks broke down in August. They were not resumed until the outbreak of the war which would explain why none of the agreed munitions or supplies reached Poland before her final defeat.

The Poles were quite correct in their suspicion that their require-

ments were not considered the most important. On 5 July the Deputy Chiefs of Staff had prepared a more extensive memorandum based on the earlier one in which they gave a comprehensive list of countries in the order of priority to which aid was to be granted.⁵⁰ The Deputy Chiefs of Staff took into account only strategic factors, excluding political considerations. Thus the basis of the priority which a country's requirements would receive was:

- 1 The broad strategy for the conduct of war
- 2 The fighting value of the forces of the particular countries
- 3 The value of a country to Britain in so far as she can deny facilities to the enemy

Britain's commitment to her traditional areas of interest was once more reconfirmed but, as previously, East European potential partners and actual allies were also considered. On taking into account the above criteria Poland was considered the most important factor in the creation of an eastern front. While reconfirming the previous statement that Poland was the key power in Eastern Europe the military chiefs hoped that either the Soviet Union or France would supply Poland. In the priority list for Naval and anti-ship armaments Poland occupied the ninth position with France, Egypt and Turkey as the first three respectively. In the list of land and anti-aircraft armaments she was placed fifth with France, Egypt and Turkey once more and in that order, as the three most important. Only in the list for air armaments was Poland placed as fourth, and first among the European countries.⁵¹ The list of priorities assembled in accordance with the requirements and plans of each of the services would explain the relative ease with which the Poles obtained a promise of planes but found it virtually impossible to obtain artillery and naval supplies.

In the memorandum the Deputy Chiefs of Staff appeared to list both Rumania and Bulgaria as rather important components of a potential eastern front. In the case of Bulgaria it was stated 'without her assistance it is unlikely that Rumania would be able to offer any great degree of resistance to German aggression . . . We therefore regard Bulgaria as the key to the Balkan situation today.' While in the case of Rumania, Britain's interest in the fate of the country was described as twofold: 'Firstly she is the power which geographically links Poland to the other Balkan states. Without her assistance there can therefore be no continuous Eastern front. Secondly, she is a

large producer of oil and it is essential that this source of supply should not fall under German domination.'

The political shortcomings of this analysis are startling in so far as it was known that Rumania and Bulgaria were unlikely to co-operate in the face of German aggression, deep mutual enmity precluding this, notwithstanding the unlikely event of both viewing German actions as hostile. Since April it was also known that Poland and Rumania were not prepared to join forces against Germany, the complexities of Central European politics ruling this out. The view of Poland as the key to the creation of an eastern front is further compounded by the total absence of relations with Bulgaria. The Deputy Chiefs of Staff finally reaffirmed their preference that the Soviet Union's help should be obtained in supplying the East European front.

The formal British invitation to the Poles to send a delegation to discuss financial aid was communicated to Raczyński on 23 May. The wording of the invitation was such that the Poles could have few illusions as to the reception they would receive. The British memorandum contained a passage in which it was stated that, 'In view of the financial commitments which have already been incurred by His Majesty's Government, in respect of their rearmament programme, it is not possible to envisage financial assistance on the scale suggested.'⁵² Despite this negative response of the British, Beck was forced to seek some potential source of loans, because, if he was to continue with the extensive preparations for war that Poland was pursuing, he could only count on France and Britain for aid. France was already supplying Poland so that Beck had no alternative but to proceed with his request to Britain because the Poles still refused to consider the Soviet Union as a possible source of supplies.

On 9 June he informed Raczyński of his decision to proceed with sending a delegation to Britain. Colonel Koc headed the delegation, not in the capacity of Director of Bank Handlowy, but as a confidant of government ministers, as well as on account of his knowledge of military affairs, since Koc was also a member of the General Staff. Beck further informed Raczyński that Koc would be in possession of political as well as General Staff instructions.⁵³

The financial negotiations with the Poles were conducted on the British side solely by the representatives of the Treasury. Thus the Foreign Office, by then an ardent supporter of extensive commit-

ments to Poland, was wholly excluded from the proceedings. The situation horrified most Foreign Office officials who took heed of Kennard's suggestion that it was in Britain's interest to support Poland. Following the British official answer to the Polish request, Ashton-Gwatkin, the Economic Councillor at the Foreign Office, exclaimed with horror 'when I saw the reply sent to the Polish Ambassador's memorandum I thought it must be inspired by a wish to see Poland weakened and come to terms with Germany about Danzig and the Corridor so that war might be averted'.⁵⁴

Ashton-Gwatkin's memorandum was followed by an equally emphatic one written by Sargent. He considered the matter to be a 'major question of policy'. He in particular stressed the dangers that would result from the Treasury applying the narrowest of financial considerations to each foreign request for aid. His fear was that the general principles of British foreign policy, among which he considered to be the creation of a peace front, were being overlooked.⁵⁵

Ashton-Gwatkin's and Sargent's memoranda drew Halifax's attention to the problem. He feared that it would be difficult to bring the matter before the Foreign Policy Committee but appreciated the difficulty of the Foreign Office having a say in the decision-making concerning such complex financial questions. He proposed to write to the Chancellor suggesting that a Foreign Office representative be present at the talks with the Poles.⁵⁶

Halifax's memorandum was in fact an open admission that he saw no means of enforcing considerations of British foreign policy upon the Treasury, unless this was clearly authorised by the Cabinet. In these circumstances the Foreign Office, though subsequently well informed of the course of talks with the Poles, remained wholly excluded from the decision-making thus enabling the Treasury to pursue their policy according to their limited point of view and their interpretation of priorities governing British economic needs, without having to take in to account broader political issues.

On 1 July Leith-Ross of the Treasury handed to the Polish delegation a memorandum in which he informed the Poles of the decision to grant to Poland export credit guarantees to a total of £8 millions worth of military equipment: £300,000 for land forces together with 100 Battle aeroplanes and 14 Hurricane fighters. It was stressed that no supplies could be provided for the Navy. £2 million would also be available for the electrification scheme and £1,500,000 for the purchase of supplies for key Polish industries. The Treasury

memorandum emphasised that the majority of supplies required by the Poles were vital to British industry and the rearmament programmes, and it was this reason which prevented them from considering more generous arrangements.⁵⁷ The question of a cash loan was to be discussed at subsequent meetings between the Treasury officials and the Polish delegation.

In fact, talks had been proceeding between the British Treasury and the French government with a view to making the cash loan a joint one in which the British proposed to offer £5 million and hoped the French would add 600 million francs. The conditions presented to the Poles by the British for the granting of the loans were that Poland should consider the devaluation of her currency and show herself more amenable towards Britain in the economic talks which were proceeding between the two governments. The Poles were quite horrified by the British conditions, while at the same time they considered the loan to be wholly inadequate.⁵⁸

The Foreign Office was equally disturbed. Their unease was further increased when they were informed that the proposed French loan was to be tied to a demand that Poland improve her relations with the Soviet Union. The French hoped to force the Poles to agree to allowing Soviet planes to fly over Poland in event of war. The British Foreign Office's attitude throughout the Anglo-French talks with the Russians had been to keep the Poles informed and not to force them into co-operation. Although the Polish attitude towards the Soviet Union was seen as creating difficulties, Foreign Office officials felt that the historical background to their differences ought to be appreciated.⁵⁹

Three meetings took place between the Treasury representatives and the Poles in order to discuss the question of devaluing the Polish currency. These meetings, which took place between 10 and 12 July, are important in so far as it is evident from the course of discussion that the Treasury was unwilling to modify its stand and displayed hostility to the very idea of granting loans to the Poles. The tone used by Waley in particular was highly aggressive and the British side showed themselves unwilling to take into account any considerations other than purely financial ones. During the talks on 11 July the Poles were informed that the granting of the loans was conditional on the Poles committing themselves to devalue their currency.⁶⁰ The most difficult exchanges took place on 12 July when Koc and Domaniewski tried to point out that, although devaluation

needed to be considered, the money requested was intended for the purchase of armaments and therefore, in the political circumstances, should be independent of long-term commercial and economic estimations. In an outburst of unusual petulance, Leith-Ross pointed out that he had been informed that £1.5 million was intended for raw materials. He felt that this information exposed the duplicity of the Poles.⁶¹

One cannot avoid the conclusion that the Treasury was indifferent to the difficulties facing the Poles and was trying to negotiate the best possible commercial deal for Britain instead of a strategic aid agreement made necessary by the critical international situation, whereby it was in Britain's interest to strengthen any future Polish war effort.

Still seething with indignation, Waley drafted a memorandum to the Treasury in which he referred to what he considered to be the undesirability of allowing the Poles to spend the credits on munitions rather than industrial supplies as had been initially agreed. He pointed out that: 'I fear that once we have signed the agreement we have committed ourselves to the grant of the money; that after discussion we will be forced to allow the Poles to use it for military expenses; that it will be quickly wasted, and that we shall have the Poles again on our doorstep, clamouring for more money to avert a financial collapse.'⁶²

The British offer was considered by the Poles to be wholly unsatisfactory. On 14 July Raczynski informed the Foreign Office of the Polish decision to reject it.⁶³ The Polish *aide-mémoire* stated that the aim of the request for loans had been, on the one hand, to utilize the full potential of the Polish industrial capacity in preparation for war and, on the other, to obtain vital munitions supplies. The Poles accused the British representatives of having failed to understand Polish difficulties and alleged that the British had made demands which would have damaged Polish interests and which had little in common with the initial Polish proposals. It was characteristic of Beck that, although fully aware that unless he turned to the Soviet Union, Britain could be the only potential supplier of the required assistance, nevertheless he rejected the British proposal concerning the cash loan without making any contingent arrangements with the Soviet Union.⁶⁴

It would appear that Beck's refusal to consider the British proposal for a cash loan was a manoeuvre whereby Beck hoped to force

the British to increase their initial offer. On the other hand it is clear that the economic and political situation was not conducive to the implementation of the Treasury demands. If the first assumption is correct, then Beck received little support from his ambassadors in France and Britain and none from Koc. Koc warned Beck against using the refusal as a gambit, as he feared that this would have an undesirable effect on the talks conducted by the military mission and on relations between the two countries generally.⁶⁵ Since one of Beck's grievances was the British unwillingness to grant the cash loan in gold, Raczyński, supporting Koc's communication, assured Beck of the real difficulties faced by the British government in this respect. He also warned that he considered it unlikely that the British would improve their offer.⁶⁶

The French had so far shown themselves more understanding of the problems faced by the Poles. On 13 May Daladier discussed with Łukasiewicz the Polish request for the advance payment of the next instalment of the Rambouillet credit of 135 million francs, which would have been paid in 1940. In addition, the Poles requested financial credits of 1 billion francs and another 1 billion francs cash loan. By 20 May Daladier was able to inform the Polish Ambassador of the Council of Ministers' decision to grant the advance instalment of the Rambouillet loan and additional credits for military materials. The question of cash loans was left for later discussion.⁶⁷

Thus it was hoped by Beck that pressure in Paris could help to increase the cash loan offered jointly by the French and the British. Łukasiewicz did warn that the French could refuse to offer a loan in the case of a British refusal to participate in it.⁶⁸ The Poles, however, were prepared to modify their demands at least to accommodate the British Treasury fears of the Poles sinking the gold into maintaining the inflated value of their currency. On 20 July Koc presented modified proposals to the Treasury. The Poles were hoping that the condition relating to devaluation would be removed and a cash loan convertible into gold would be granted. In return they proposed to undertake not to transfer the loan except:

- 1 to meet expenses of a military nature
- 2 in an equal proportion with the gold or foreign exchange held by the Bank of Poland or by the Polish government⁶⁹

The Polish proposal clearly removed the objection which the Treasury gave for opposing the granting of a cash loan convertible

into gold. It was apparent that the concept of a cash loan was being opposed by the Treasury in principle mainly because of the fear that the loss of convertible resources would affect Britain's purchasing power in the future. Nevertheless, one cannot fail to note that the Treasury acted with an evident animosity towards Poland in this matter. In a memorandum dated 18 July, Waley asserted that 'if the Polish Government are not prepared to accept our proposals as a basis of discussion, then we are not prepared to accept theirs'.⁷⁰

Beck, acting against the advice tendered by his Ambassadors, instructed Raczyński on 24 July to refuse to sign the draft agreement for a cash loan.⁷¹ He repeated the accusations made earlier. Although he admitted that the Polish currency would have to be devalued eventually, he considered the present circumstances inappropriate, and the sum involved too small to have attached to it demands of such an important nature.⁷² In his conversation with Szembek on 21 July Beck warned that he would reject the conditions which he considered out of proportion to the sum involved.⁷³

In spite of the breakdown of the British talks with the Poles, the French government decided to grant Poland their share of the proposed cash loan. On 19 August it was announced that the French had concluded with the Poles an agreement for credits amounting to 430 million francs.⁷⁴

The Anglo-Polish talks were resumed on 1 September 1939. Using the pretext of following up a hint dropped by Kennard, the Poles requested the resumption of talks. The sum they hoped to obtain was the one originally offered in July of £5 million and 600 million francs. In spite of the gravity of the situation (on 1 September Germany attacked Poland), the Treasury retained its undisputed right to decide the conditions attached to any loans, as well as maintaining its well known hostility to the Poles. Thus Waley noted that 'on the whole my feeling is that I am exceedingly sorry that the Poles have re-opened the question (largely owing to an indiscretion on the part of our Ambassador at Warsaw) but I feel that it is very difficult to refuse to maintain the offer which we made in July'.⁷⁵ Accordingly an agreement for the above amount was concluded and signed on 7 September 1939.⁷⁶

During the months following the granting of commitments to defend Poland and Rumania few efforts were made to evaluate the feasibility of these countries being able to sustain the burden of creating an eastern front against German expansion. Militarily

Britain and France remained committed exclusively to the defence of the western front; it was, therefore, realised from the start that any fighting that was to take place in the east would have to be sustained by Britain's eastern allies without direct British aid or military assistance.

The question of financial and material support in preparation for war would therefore have been a crucial issue had Britain intended to mount opposition in the east. This, nevertheless, did not happen and it could arguably be considered to be the most telling proof of British and also French unwillingness and inability to prepare for German aggression eastwards. The crucial question is whether the British government was genuinely unable to finance and support various rearmament programmes so that the eastern front became a victim of Britain's inability to make consistent preparations for world war during the brief months of peace that still remained, or whether the question of an eastern front was never seriously entertained. The latter suggestion would also imply British reluctance to perceive action by Germany on her eastern border as endangering European peace.

The analysis of the content of Cabinet, Treasury and Staff deliberation would support the latter hypothesis. For the question of supplies, finance and materials for Britain's allies in the east was never considered to be a priority and was only uneasily fitted into the strictly retained list of priorities which Britain had arrived at earlier. In this list, the defence of her Mediterranean routes remained of foremost importance and in that context 'east' meant the Eastern Mediterranean. The proliferation of departmental, often conflicting, views could only have prevailed because of the absence of precise instructions from the Cabinet. And these were clearly not forthcoming. The question of aid to Poland and Rumania became closely intertwined with other issues; trading links, the Treasury's subjective view of the viability of the economies and currencies of these countries but foremost the burden which war preparations were placing on the British economy and her vital rearmament programme.

To Poland the question of war supplies and credits for the purchase of additional goods on the world markets became one of survival by May 1939. Though the Poles' evaluation of their own military prowess remained hopelessly optimistic they were aware of the shortfall in their armament production. It was therefore with

increasing desperation that the financial delegation and later the military mission sought to obtain British assistance; a mood that might have been shared by Beck, but which did not prevent him from playing his last Big Power card when he found the British loan to be demeaning in its parsimony. Unfortunately the eastern front could not have been sustained without major British and French supplies, and these were not to be granted to either Poland or Rumania.

6

The Soviet Union: the rejected partner

When thinking of an eastern front, both political and military leaders had always to consider the position of the Soviet Union. During the 1920s and 1930s it would have been difficult to overlook the potential offered by the Soviet Union in any European combination, if only because of the implications of the Rapallo agreement. By the time of the Czechoslovak crisis it had been necessary to consider the possibility of the Soviet Union acting in defence of Czechoslovakia. The previous spectre of Russo-German collaboration had been on the whole dispelled by that time. Had the Soviet Union not been brought into the scope of France's European policies, her sheer geographical position east of Germany should have compelled most politicians to face the dilemma of the desirability or otherwise of courting Soviet assistance. And yet, on reflection, the remarkable feature of the period between May and September 1939 was that British politicians persuaded themselves of the non-existence of the dilemma posed by the absence of any commitment by Russia to European politics.

This unwillingness to envisage the possible consequences of excluding the Soviet Union from the scope of Britain's East European policy was never held with either equanimity or ease. Indeed, the question of the Soviet Union bedevilled all, if not most, Cabinet and Foreign Policy Committee deliberations during that time. But in spite of some willingness to enter into bargaining, little progress was made towards a major reappraisal. While the manner and substance of the British commitments to Poland and Rumania showed a lamentable lack of judgement the inability to come to terms with the need for Soviet partnership in any policy to check German expansion was the most telling and the most damning feature of Britain's policy in Eastern Europe.

The course of negotiations between Britain, France and the Soviet Union has been traced quite adequately in other works and its repetition would add little to the knowledge we have on the subject.¹ What is important, however, is to understand how, on the one hand, political leaders resisted the increasingly pressing consideration that in Britain's policy towards Germany the role of the Soviet Union was an important factor, while on the other hand the military leaders came to differ dramatically in their evaluation of the need to court Soviet benevolent neutrality, if not outright commitment to Britain. This rift did not occur because of a simple difference in the evaluation of the usefulness of Soviet aid, but was an expression of much more fundamental differences of perspective which developed between the politicians and military leaders after the March crisis.

The political leadership, but most steadfastly Chamberlain, maintained throughout the spring and summer a determination to negotiate with Germany. In spite of increased military preparations and progressive involvement in France, Britain was not committed to fight Germany until the end of August 1939. In view of this, diplomatic efforts continued to be important and no irrevocable steps, which would alienate Germany, least of all over developments in Eastern Europe, were allowed. Britain's attitude towards the Danzig crisis and the military and financial talks with Poland amply accentuate this point. Neither the guarantee to Poland nor the subsequent one to Rumania altered Britain's attitude towards Europe so as to signal to Germany an unequivocal message of 'thus far and no further'. Not even the inclusion of Danzig within the scope of the British guarantee could have been seen as irrevocably placing Britain on Poland's side. For British actions both over her negotiations with Poland and utterances made in Berlin and Rome allowed clearly for ambiguities, of which Germany was aware, and which she could have exploited had she chosen to do so.

Thus a commitment to the Soviet Union, in particular one which from the outset would have been an anti-German alliance, would have been a break with the ambiguity which well suited British politicians after March 1939. The will to bargain and ultimately to give in to most of the Soviet Union's demands developed not as a result of the re-definition of Britain's priorities but because of the need to yield to pressures, internal and external. In political terms the eastern front remained a concept as vague and undefined as the British politicians chose to maintain it at the time. The inability and

unwillingness of Chamberlain to obtain Soviet aid for Britain's commitments to Poland and Rumania exposed its unreality.

To the military leaders the situation presented itself in a different light. They were briefed to plan for war against Germany and with France as Britain's ally, an ally who refused to prepare for an attack against Germany and maintained that action against Italy should take priority over that on the western front. At the same time Britain still hoped to keep Italy out of the war. Thus France refused to accept the British plan that action against Germany should take precedence over that against Italy. In addition the political commitments to Poland and Rumania appeared to fit uneasily into the long-term plan for a war in the west for it was always known that not much could be done to assist these newly acquired allies. If Britain was most likely to enter into the war because of German actions in the east, then to wait until Germany completed her inevitable victory there and turned westwards, appeared to be an unnerving proposal. The unease of the British military chiefs was compounded by, on the one hand, the realisation that neither Poland nor Rumania could jointly or independently maintain even a semblance of an eastern front while, on the other hand, there emerged the apprehension lest the Soviet Union drift towards the German bloc. Unburdened by the need to take into account political considerations and facing the stark reality of a war in defence of Poland or Rumania, without a worthwhile eastern ally, the military chiefs came to view the subject as requiring major reconsideration and swift action to prevent an irrevocably dangerous combination of enemies. Having no need to pacify the protestations of an assortment of objectors from the Archbishop of Canterbury to the Commonwealth and Dominion states, the military leadership increasingly came to view the Soviet Union as a worthwhile ally.

The position and influence of the French government on the British during the British-French-Soviet talks was not easy to discern. At times the French were notably in advance of the British in their willingness to overlook unpalatable aspects of the association, but on other occasions they were glad to let the British take the lead. In April Daladier appeared to have been shaken by Italian action in Albania and anxiously demanded a clearer definition of Britain's obligations to Europe.² At those moments of high tension Soviet co-operation appeared to be vital. This mood was not sustained and in June there was an apparent indifference towards East European

politics which manifested itself more clearly in a reluctance to define political obligations towards Poland.³ Bonnet appeared not to have undergone a change of heart either and most likely took his lead from the British and not the United States. The ambivalence of the French approach to the Soviet Union was further enhanced by the military leaders' refusal to take the responsibility for negotiations with the Soviet Union. As in the case of the definition of obligations towards Poland, politicians and military leaders jockeyed with each other for a back position, so as not to be seen to be taking the initiative in advocating this controversial policy.⁴ The result was that, though showing more obvious signs of anxiety, the French were happy to have Britain take the lead, with the exception of a brief moment when attempts were made to force the Poles to grant permission for the entry of Soviet troops on Polish territory. In any event by 23 August the issue of Soviet co-operation was perceived as having little relevance.

When trying to understand British motives for embarking on talks with the Russians it is very difficult to define what precisely Britain hoped to achieve by involving the Soviet Union in British policies in Eastern Europe. Undoubtedly Cabinet Ministers had come under pressure from Parliament to include the Soviet Union in Britain's new policy in Europe. There was also the realisation that neither Rumania nor Poland would be either supplied or aided by Britain during the future war. But the precise aims of the British government, once the Cabinet conceded the need to open talks with the Russians, remain undefined.

On 18 April the Soviet Union responded to the British invitation for a Soviet initiative by suggesting a pact of mutual assistance.⁵ British bewilderment was summed up during the meeting of the Foreign Policy Committee on 19 April. Chamberlain taking an extremely narrow view of the issue, debated the question of how Poland should be strengthened and concluded that 'anything which tended to shake Polish confidence was most undesirable at the present juncture. The first essential was to get Poland into a firm, confident and self-reliant state.'⁶ The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster summarised the views of the members of the committee when he stated that:

we might reinforce our answer by arguing that our policy at the present stage must confine itself to making arrangements for the safety of the States directly menaced with aggression, i.e. the States which had a common border with

the Axis Powers. It was only after we had completed this stage that we should be able to make defensive arrangements with states like Russia . . . For the moment nothing must be allowed to deflect us from our task of erecting the first barriers against aggression.

The suspicion that British ministers had only the vaguest idea of the role that they expected the Soviet Union to play in Britain's European policy is further confirmed when on Gafencu's departure from London Halifax reported that the Rumanian Minister appeared to echo Beck's determination not to provoke Germany. A recent military report also drew attention to the disadvantages of obtaining Soviet support. Both Poland and Rumania were known to be opposed to such agreements. Halifax concluded his report to the Cabinet by stating that: 'We should not act in such a way as to forgo the chance of Russian help in war, we should not jeopardise the common front with Poland and we should not jeopardise the cause of peace.'⁷ He also warned that if Britain was to forge ahead with an agreement with the Soviet Union, 'we should run a serious risk of breaking the common front which we were endeavouring to establish'.

On 17 May the Cabinet discussed the conclusions of the Foreign Policy Committee of the previous evening. A dramatic new element had been introduced into the discussion in the form of a Chiefs of Staff report which dissented from the view that there was no need to include the Soviet Union in British plans. For the first time the military leaders warned of the dangers of losing Soviet aid. Furthermore the Russians had responded to the British proposal for a simple declaration by restating the need for a tripartite agreement. In other words, the object of the discussion was shifting from a general need to assist Poland and/or Rumania in their opposition to Germany to that of a pact of mutual assistance between Britain, France and the Soviet Union.⁸ By now Halifax appeared to have been impressed by the need to reach a speedy conclusion to the talks with the Russians. However, the aim remained the same and he stated that 'the most helpful line would be to point this out to Russia and to press them to come to an agreement which would strengthen our Peace Front with Poland and Rumania'.

By mid-May the Cabinet had come to support the idea of an agreement with the Soviet Union. This remained anathema to Chamberlain who, while reluctantly yielding to pressure to agree to talks for a three-power agreement, warned on 19 May that 'An

alliance with Russia would constitute a new factor, and would mean that the Great Powers would be lined up in peace just as they would be if war broke out. This, indeed might be a decisive factor with Hitler.⁹

During the Cabinet meeting on 24 May, Halifax admitted that he had come to believe that the breakdown of negotiations with the Soviet Union could have incalculable repercussions and he therefore proposed to go ahead with direct talks for a bilateral agreement.¹⁰ Chamberlain's intimate thoughts on the subject are most revealing. In a letter to his sister Ida on 21 May he wrote: 'In the end I think much will depend on the attitude of Poland and Rumania. If bringing Russia in means their running out I should think change a very disastrous one.'¹¹

The need to bring in the Soviet Union demanded the accommodation of what had already been recognised in March as two incompatible alternatives; on the one hand association with the East European states and on the other hand the agreement with the Soviet Union. Having chosen the former, British politicians were acutely aware of the shortcomings of those alliances which remained, in spite of all that was being said about them, mere political gestures without any strategic importance. If the commitments to Poland and Rumania were to be of military consequence, the Soviet Union was a vital element either as supplier, as Britain's ally, or at the very least as a benevolent neutral. But it was difficult to reconcile this with these commitments already made, both because of the potentially provocative nature of an association with the Soviet Union and because of the eastern allies refusal to be associated with the Soviet Union. Notwithstanding the incompatibility of these two options facing British politicians, it is apparent that they never fully took into account the implications of this dilemma. The need to create a 'strong and durable' eastern front was neglected irrespective of whether it was proposed that it be created by Poland, Rumania or the Soviet Union. The most likely explanation of the ministers' shortsightedness is the fact that having embarked on one policy, they preferred to stay with it, rather than to transfer to the other. The need to face Germany with a military threat in the east remained confined to the realms of political posturing rather than long-term military and political planning.

The decision to enter in earnest into talks with the Soviet Union with the aim of negotiating a three-power alliance appears not to

have marked an abandonment of old apprehensions but in fact was a surrender to pressure. Chamberlain, unlike his Foreign Secretary, never came to terms with the need for the Soviet partnership and remained truculent throughout. To the very last he tried to avoid giving his consent to a fully fledged alliance. At the end of May when he was forced to concede that Britain could not hold back any longer, he nevertheless still tried to ensure that the result of the negotiations would be open to doubt and thus politically rendered meaningless. His aim had been to tie the agreement with the Soviet Union to the League Covenant. As he candidly admitted in a letter to his sister on 28 May:

In substance it gives the Russians what they want but in form and presentation it avoids the idea of an alliance and substitutes a declaration of *intention* in certain circumstances in fulfilment of an obligation under Art. xvi of the Covenant. It is really a most ingenious idea for it is calculated to catch all the misgivings and at the same time by tying the thing up to Art. xvi we give it a temporary character. I have no doubt that one of these days Art. xvi will be amended or repealed and that should give us the opportunity to revising our relations with the Soviet if we want to.¹²

The Soviet Union did not accept this proposal, clearly seeing in this idea the intended weakening of the proposed obligation. The British Cabinet was forced to negotiate on the basis of Soviet proposals.

Halifax's perspective on the subject of the Soviet Union had changed during the month of May. Sooner than Chamberlain, he realised that Britain would have to accept negotiations on the basis of the Soviet proposal or have no agreement at all. Nevertheless he too was not sure as to what Britain was to obtain from such an uncomfortable partnership. His comments in Cabinet and the Foreign Policy Committee show him more inclined to yield to Soviet demands. But he too appeared puzzled as to the effect this would have on Germany and doubted how this could be fitted into the existing commitments undertaken by Britain towards Poland and Rumania.

During the Foreign Policy Committee meeting on 4 July Halifax explained two courses of action which in his opinion presented themselves to the British.¹³ In view of Molotov's unacceptable definition of indirect aggression and the Soviet Union's unwillingness to include Holland and Switzerland into the list of countries covered by the agreement Halifax saw the courses of action as: to break off talks or to seek a basic tripartite pact. But even he wavered,

fearful of the consequences of both alternatives. While not favouring the breaking off of talks Halifax still contemplated:

that perhaps the strongest argument against a simple Tripartite Pact was that such a Pact might encourage Herr Hitler in some violent Polish or Danzig adventure. It should, however, be remembered that if, as was generally believed, it was true that Herr Hitler rated Russia low from the military point of view, he would still have to face Poland, France and ourselves.

The Soviet demand for the opening of military talks renewed France's and Britain's dilemma. But the initiative had long passed from the British hands and soon they were being swept along not having yet defined their own aims or intentions. Halifax conceded on 10 July that 'perhaps the military agreement might not be so important as appeared at first sight. In any event so long as the military conversations were taking place we should be preventing Soviet Russia from entering the German camp.'¹⁴ British complacency concerning the possibility of the Soviet Union negotiating with the German side simultaneously is quite striking. During the Cabinet meeting on 19 July Halifax admitted that there was reliable information revealing that talks were taking place between Germany and the Soviet Union. He nevertheless dismissed them, stating that it was 'impossible to assess their real value but it seemed likely that these discussions related to industrial matters'. Chamberlain conceded 'that he could not bring himself to believe that a real alliance between Russia and Germany was possible'.¹⁵

As the opening of military talks was approved so a complacent hope that they would not lead to a swift decision set in. It was also suspected that the Soviet Union would raise the question of Poland's attitude towards receiving Soviet aid. At the same time the crisis in Danzig inspired the Cabinet Ministers with a hope that Polish and Soviet relations could be improved with the aim of facilitating such aid. Thus the decision to approve the opening of military talks with the Soviet Union was once more accompanied by a bland conclusion that: 'It was desirable to establish closer relations between Poland and the Soviet Union and efforts in this direction which would be very valuable, would be likely to occupy some time.'¹⁶

As already stated the military chiefs developed a considerably different perception of the need to obtain Soviet cooperation. From the outset, on 18 March when they had been asked to comment on the developments taking place in Eastern Europe, they did not dismiss the possibility of Britain having to consider the inclusion of the

Soviet Union in any proposal for opposition to Germany in that part of Europe. As has been shown earlier, Chamberlain dealt with the advice of the Chiefs of Staff in a very selective manner and ignored their emphatic statement contained in one of the paragraphs dealing with the possibility of Poland being neutral and the Soviet Union being on Britain's side. The Chiefs of Staff had stated that in these circumstances, 'the position would alter in our favour'.¹⁷

Chamberlain and his Cabinet nevertheless based their policy against Germany on Poland and Rumania and ignored the military implications of this decision. But commenting on a memorandum entitled 'Military Implications of an Anglo-French Guarantee of Poland and Rumania', dated 3rd April, the Chiefs of Staff stressed the need for advance planning if any eastern front was to become a reality. They concluded 'we think it right to mention that the effectiveness of cooperation between widely separated allies must depend to a large extent upon a definite coordination on plans to meet the various contingencies with which they may be faced'.¹⁸ As neither Britain nor France were in the position to act as suppliers to the eastern allies the Soviet Union was clearly of vital importance.

On 18 April the Committee for Foreign Affairs had requested a report from the Chiefs of Staff. The points of reference of the report were defined in curiously narrow terms, for it was suggested:

that this appreciation should not take the form of a review of the military arguments for or against accepting the Russian proposal, but that it should rather confine itself to estimating from whatever information might already be in the possession of the Chiefs of Staff the present military value and capacity for performance of the Soviet Army, Navy and Air Force.

The Chiefs of Staff clearly found these restrictions difficult to maintain and their report contained as many political recommendations as it did military.¹⁹ The military leaders were on the whole restrained in their assessment of the value of Soviet assistance. They considered the Soviet fleet to be capable of containing the German navy in the Baltic and the Black Sea as well as disrupting the flow of Swedish iron ore to Germany. The Soviet army was considered to have suffered as a result of the purges but the Chiefs of Staff warned against dismissing its usefulness and emphasised that 'even if the war went so badly for the Allies as to result in Poland and Rumania being overrun the Russians would still contain very substantial German forces on the Eastern front'.

The assessment of the Russian air force raised doubts as to the air

potential of the Russians, but it was felt that flying from Russian territory, aeroplanes could reach as far as Berlin–Leipzig–Prussia, Vienna, Fiume, Sofia and the Dodecanese. This would have been an important contribution in view of the inability of the British and French planes to penetrate deep into the German industrial hinterland.

The British military chiefs had clearly based their plans for war on the assumption that Britain would prefer to fight a war on two fronts against Germany. They therefore stressed in their assessment of each of the services that, while unlikely to deliver a decisive victory against Germany, the Soviet Union would not merely facilitate fighting in the west, but would be of considerable importance on its own account. The conclusion of this train of thought was that the absence of the Soviet Union in a war against Germany would be a great loss. It would also constitute a dangerous omission because of the possibility that the Soviet Union may not choose neutrality as the alternative to outright association with the western powers. Thus the Chiefs of Staff warned on two occasions: 'We should perhaps draw attention to the very grave military dangers inherent in the possibility of any agreement between Germany and Russia.' Finally, while not overestimating the active contribution of the Soviet Union in a war with Germany, the Chiefs of Staff cautioned that 'Russian cooperation would be invaluable in that Germany would be unable to draw upon Russia's immense reserves of food, raw materials, and should therefore succumb more quickly to our economic stranglehold.'

The Chiefs of Staff insistence on preferring any war against Germany to be on two fronts rather than on a single western front, which they presumed would emerge after the near inevitable defeat by Germany of Poland and Rumania, was undoubtedly a point not appreciated by the ministers. They continued to ponder the political consequences of the alliance with the Soviet Union, to the evident exclusion of the seriously disadvantageous military position in which Britain would place herself by eschewing Soviet assistance. Thus when the Cabinet requested the Chiefs of Staff to prepare a report on the Balance of Strategic Value of War as between Spain as an Enemy and Russia as an Ally, the military leaders found themselves in the position of a rider straddling two horses each galloping in a different direction. For the question of Spain touched upon that of British imperial and maritime links while that concerning the

Soviet Union could at present relate only to the question of Britain's commitments to Poland and Rumania. In addition the issue was essentially that of politics and not of military alternatives.

The Chiefs of Staff in their report persisted in cautioning against the possibility of losing the Soviet Union.²⁰ Thus once more they warned against this possibility. They stated their fears emphatically: 'A combination of the German capacity for organisation with the material and man power resources of Russia would not only eliminate all hope of saving Poland and Rumania, but would have repercussions throughout Europe and in India, the serious nature of which it would be difficult to exaggerate.' In trying to square up the two divergent aspects of the report the Chiefs of Staff clearly found it difficult to be consistent. In the conclusion, after having urged strongly that 'the active and whole-hearted assistance of Russia as an ally' should be sought, they also warned that 'the advantages of an alliance with Russia would not offset the disadvantages of the open hostility of Spain'. In this context it is interesting to note that an assumption favoured by the Cabinet was that an agreement with the Soviet Union would automatically swing Spain behind Germany's case, a political misjudgement which Britain clearly shared with Germany.

The anxiety of the Chiefs of Staff about the Soviet Union's possible move to the German camp, whose expression had so far been mainly confined to urging the politicians to retain Soviet goodwill or at least neutrality, was dramatically altered when it became apparent that the Soviet Union was insistent on the continuation of the talks only on Soviet terms. The spectre of no agreement with, or commitment from, the Soviet Union caused the military chiefs to put their full weight behind the continuation of talks with the Russians. In a report to the Foreign Policy Committee of 16 May the Chiefs of Staff abandoned all caution and urged that a full mutual assistance agreement be sought with the Soviet Union.²¹ They no longer felt that Soviet neutrality could be satisfactory. There was undoubtedly another reason for their anxiety, in addition to that of the Soviet Union moving irrevocably into the Axis bloc.

By the beginning of May the Chiefs of Staff had concluded from their talks with the French that neither side was going to assist Poland either directly or by launching an attack on Germany's western border. It was also admitted that the eastern front was unlikely to be sustained by the Poles and Rumanians unless it was a 'long, solid and durable front'.²² In view of this the need for Soviet assistance became

more urgent, for the value of the Poles and Rumanians had been ultimately discounted and unless Britain and France proposed to alter their existing strategic priorities and grant these states extensive aid, both would ultimately face Germany without any assistance from the east. Thus the Chiefs of Staff stated unequivocally: 'From the broad point of view, it is felt that a full blown guarantee of mutual assistance between Great Britain and France and the Soviet Union offers certain advantages. It would present a solid front of formidable proportions against aggression. . . .'

Even though the military chiefs had come to perceive the need for the Soviet Union in Britain's East European policy it was not possible for them to do any other than try and influence the government. The next opportunity to do so came when Britain yielded to Soviet pressure for the opening of military talks. But as long as a political treaty was not concluded the military neither could nor would feel free to enter into fully-fledged plans for joint military action against Germany. Thus when drawing up instructions for Staff talks with the Soviet Union the Committee of Imperial Defence stated that: 'The British Government is unwilling to enter into any detailed commitments which are likely to tie our hands in all circumstances. Endeavour should be therefore made to confine the Military Agreement to the broadest possible terms.'²³ When they addressed themselves to the ultimate aim of these efforts, the Chiefs of Staff returned to the previous emphasis on Poland and Rumania. It is not possible to say whether their original emphasis on the Soviet Union as the chief partner had only come about because of a fear that the government was proposing to abort all efforts in relation to the Soviet Union. More likely they remained constrained by the limits imposed by the inconclusive nature of the political talks.

Admiral Drax, the leader of the British military mission to Moscow clearly reflected the divergence of aims which existed between the military and political leaders when on 2 August at the meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence he stated that

first it was assumed that the object of the Mission was to reach a quick decision rather than that the Staff Conversations should be allowed to drag on and that the ultimate aim was to achieve a political agreement. On the other hand in his instructions he had been directed to go slowly and cautiously until such time as the political agreement was reached. There might be some difficulty in this, as it was probable that the Russians would be hoping for some tangible results from the Military conversations before they were prepared to give their final agreement to the Political Pact.²⁴

If the object of British talks with the Russians was to obtain for Poland and Russia material assistance, Halifax succeeded in obfuscating this point when he warned that the British should not commit themselves to mediate between the Soviet Union and the Rumanians and Poles. As he clearly stated to Drax: 'We did not want to become involved in negotiations between Russians and Poles or Russians and Rumanians.' Could the Foreign Secretary have suspected that such a thankless task would have soured Britain's relations with her Eastern allies? If this was the case it only further accentuates the lack of direction in the British attitude towards the Soviet Union in particular and the eastern front in general.

The subtleties of handling Polish susceptibilities were not a subject upon which the military chiefs were likely to linger long. The stark unreality of the British attitude towards the need for an eastern front inspired them with dire foreboding. Nor were the Russians as easy to handle as the politicians had implied. Marshal Voroshilov, heading the Soviet military delegation quickly exposed this weakness of the British attitude towards the eastern front. The British tried hard to keep the negotiations with the Soviet Union away from the question of Polish and Rumanian attitudes. On the second and third days of the talks Voroshilov referred to the issue and on 14 August demanded a clear explanation of how the Soviet Union was to fight Germany without the right of entry onto Polish and Rumanian territory.

An enquiry by the British Ambassador to Moscow, William Seeds, to the Foreign Office was referred to the military chiefs and in a memorandum dated 16 August, the Deputy Chiefs of Staff were able to stress once more a point which was clearly causing them deep unease.²⁵ They thus advocated that full pressure should be put on the Poles and the Rumanians to allow access to Soviet troops. Polish obduracy on the subject was clearly blinding them to the consequences of not seeking Soviet co-operation in advance of war. The military chiefs unequivocally supported the Soviet point by stating:

In our opinion it is only logical that the Russians should be given every facility for rendering assistance and putting their maximum weight into the scale on the side of the anti-aggression Powers. We consider it so important that if necessary, the strongest pressure should be exerted on Poland and Rumania to persuade them to adopt a helpful attitude.

They also added a prophetic warning that 'without immediate and

effective Russian assistance not only in the air, but on land, the longer that war would be and the less chance there would be of either Poland or Rumania emerging at the end of it as independent states in anything like their original form'.

But by the middle of August the initiative no longer lay with the British or the French. The Polish issue accentuated and emphasised the lack of commitment on the part of the western powers. In the meantime the Soviet Union found the Germans more flexible and amenable to their demands. The collapse of the three power talks came about not because of the inability of the French and the British to deliver the acquiescence of their allies to Soviet assistance, but because this issue decisively exhibited their unwillingness to invest in the creation of the eastern front, politically, materially and strategically at least to the extent to which they hoped the Soviet Union would. Consideration for Polish opposition to Soviet participation in talks for a front to fight Germany should not be interpreted necessarily as a sign of sympathy for the Polish stance: this obviously masked an indifference to the outcome of the efforts made to resolve this impasse. That the Polish attitude was not merely one of obduracy but even more so of unrelieved unreality, was a point noted by the British without undue worry. Furthermore, having rejected Polish requests for material and financial assistance the British had no means of exercising influence over the Poles. Nor did they propose to use material aid as a means of forcing the Poles to consider a more realistic attitude towards the need for Soviet aid in the event of war with Germany.

From the outset the Poles took a very detached view of the Anglo-Franco-Soviet talks. They consistently expressed the desire not to be drawn into them and hoped that Britain would not take it upon herself to represent Poland's case. Beyond that the official attitude was of olympian detachment. They in fact maintained their old preconception that the Soviet Union was in need of friends and reassurance rather than the other way round. The Councillor at the British Embassy in Warsaw reported on 21 July a conversation he had had with an unnamed official of the Polish Ministry for Foreign Affairs.²⁶ He stated that the Poles would not request aid from the Soviet Union in advance of hostilities as it would look as if Poland 'was afraid'. When the emergency came, said the official consulted, 'the Polish government were certain that they would get from Soviet Russia any assistance they needed. The Soviet government were genuinely

frightened of the Germans.' The Poles still maintained that the spectre of Polish-German co-operation against the Soviet Union was still potent and would cause the Soviet Union to seek an opportunity to aid Poland against Germany. It clearly had not been considered by the Poles that the proverbial boot was on the other foot. Furthermore, the possibility of talks with the Soviet Union dragging on inconclusively or in fact failing was even considered advantageous by the Poles. They felt that it would cause Poland to be seen in Britain as a more important ally. The Polish attitude towards the Soviet Union complemented the Foreign Office's standard prejudices on the subject and as Roberts minuted 'the Poles know the Russians much better than we do and their general conclusions are probably sound'.

The Poles were undoubtedly apprehensive lest the British-Soviet rapprochement invalidated what they saw as an achievement, namely the acceptance of Poland as an European power with which Britain had to reckon. In his conversation with Halifax on 2 August, Raczynski insisted on retaining a distinction between countries which were allies and those which were merely guaranteed. He disdainfully added that 'nor had he personally ever been very worried about the prospect of collusion between the Soviet and German Governments'.²⁷ Reporting the same conversation to his government Raczynski was able to report that Halifax had expressed himself sceptical about the likely speed and success of the Moscow talks.²⁸

In Moscow the Polish Embassy had authoritative information of the extent of Soviet-German talks. In June 1939 the Polish Military Attaché in Moscow Brzeszczynski was shown the application papers of Soviet citizens wishing to obtain transit visas through Poland. He was able to identify them as top military specialists and therefore presumed that military exchanges on the highest level were taking place between Germany and the Soviet Union. As he later wrote, regrettably Warsaw took no notice of this and answered that they were informed of the exchanges.²⁹

Thus when the British and French decided to put pressure on the Poles to obtain permission for entry into Polish territory in the event of German aggression, these efforts were doomed to failure. On 18 August Kennard reported a conversation that the British Military Attaché had had with General Stachiewicz, the Chief of the Polish General Staff who 'saw no benefit to be gained by the Soviet Govern-

ment through Red troops operating in Poland against Germany'.³⁰ This view was confirmed by Beck who said 'that Marshal Voroshilov was attempting today to reach in a peaceful manner what he had attempted to obtain by force of arms in 1920'.³¹ When on 22 August Szembek discussed with Łubieński the German-Soviet Pact he was told that it would not change anything. According to Łubieński it was always considered that the Rapallo agreement was still operative and thus Poland's Non-Aggression Pact with the Soviet Union remained valid too. However, he admitted that it increased the likelihood of war breaking out.³²

Ribbentrop's departure for Moscow caused the Poles to relent to the extent that Beck allowed the French delegation to use a formula of utmost ambiguity which he believed would ease French and British difficulties in Moscow but which would at the same time reaffirm, for internal consumption, Polish opposition to the Soviet demand for the right of passage.³³ This formula stated that 'The Polish and French Staff are sure that in the event of joint action against aggression, cooperation between Poland and the Soviet Union is not out of the question, in circumstances which remain to be agreed.' But the Polish compromise came too late and would clearly have not been satisfactory to the Soviet Union.

If an attempt is made to recreate the way in which the concept of an eastern front evolved in British political and military planning during the spring and summer of 1939 it becomes apparent that the Soviet Union was accorded only passing consideration. As we have seen, throughout this period the government maintained a steadfast determination not to be drawn into a conflict in the east in spite of the growing realisation that war was likely to break out over German action either in Danzig or some direct attack on Poland. Military preparations for war proceeded therefore on the assumption that though war was likely to break out with an incident in Eastern Europe, it was not necessarily going to be won in the east. The analysis of the substance and manner of the exchanges with the Soviet Union confirm therefore what had already been clear in relation to Poland and Rumania, namely that the eastern front was of use to the British only on a political level and not as a military threat. Britain sought a very general commitment from the Soviet Union. But unlike the case of Poland and Rumania, Britain did not succeed in obtaining one and in search for it found herself drawn towards the deeper waters of an alliance with the Soviet Union. Britain's perception

of the issue was not fundamentally altered by those negotiations. Although shaken by that experience, the British Government retained a view of the eastern front as marginal to British policy towards Europe.

7

August 1939

By August 1939 the contradictory nature of the Anglo-Polish relationship had manifested itself in most of the exchanges and arrangements made between them. The incompatibility of this partnership was highlighted during August because of the rapid escalation of tension between Poland and Germany, most notably over the issue of Danzig and also because both sides did recognise that war was inevitable in the near future. This realisation of the imminence of a European war did not affect the Polish-British relationship constructively. Each side had earlier recognised the military impotence of their relationship and both had viewed the bilateral agreement as a political gesture. The inevitability of war breaking out accentuated the difference of perspectives that had always existed between Poland and Britain. Understandably Poland was preparing for war to defend her sovereignty if not her very existence, while Britain pensively contemplated the undesirability of German aggression and further aggrandisement at the expense of Central and Eastern Europe.

Most Polish politicians and military leaders sought to reassure themselves of the maximum British commitment to fighting Germany. However, they remained suspicious and fearful that the Danzig crisis would be seized by Britain as an opportunity for a new 'Munich'. Polish fears had been heightened by the dilatory attitude of both Britain and France made apparent during the staff and financial talks. But Polish insistence on obtaining British aid was no longer a part of a political game with Germany and had instead become a race with time in which Britain had been elevated to the role of a major sponsor.

At the same time, Britain, in spite of the assertion by the Cabinet

that the break with the previous policy of appeasement had been total, retained a distance from developments in Central Eastern Europe. While the undesirability of allowing German aggression in the region to go unchallenged was long recognised, the means of preventing this had as yet not been extended beyond the granting of guarantees to Poland and Rumania. These were political gestures which were not translated into plans for military action. The contradictory nature of the Cabinet's hopes, which were to stop German aggression, and the action it was prepared to sanction which in effect was not much, was apparent even to the very members of the Cabinet. To recognise German actions in Central Eastern Europe as threatening British interests in the broadest meaning of the word, would have meant not merely a break with Britain's policy towards Germany, but also towards Europe as a whole. And until this aggression had taken place, irrevocably altering the accepted political balance of power and sending shock waves through areas more directly relevant to Britain's world interests the British government was unable to effect such a major change of perspective.

In these circumstances Danzig became the fulcrum upon which Anglo-Polish relations came to be unsteadily balanced. Since March it had been considered that if Hitler was going to make another move in Europe it would be in the Free City. Two aspects of the problem in particular caused anxiety. The first was that British ministers in fact considered German demands for the incorporation of Danzig into German territory to be justified and would have, in other circumstances advocated the return of the city to the Reich. The inclusion of the case of German action against the Free City in the British guarantee had always caused considerable unease. It was the second aspect of the problem which had nevertheless caused the case of the Danzig city to be included in the British commitment to Poland and prevented British politicians from openly advocating that Poland relinquish her rights in the city. This was that German designs in Europe, in particular Eastern Europe, appeared to be far more ambitious than was initially suspected. The occupation of Prague marked a watershed in so far as it cast aside Germany's pretence of a reasonable revision of the Versailles Treaty.

In these circumstances none of the Cabinet members, including Chamberlain, were prepared to recommend negotiations between Poland and Germany with the aim of satisfying the old German territorial claims to Danzig and the Corridor. Furthermore, unlike

Beneš, the Czechoslovak President who during the German-Czechoslovak crisis in 1938 sought British and French advice, Beck would not allow the British to assume responsibility for dealing on Poland's behalf with the Free City Senate or the German government, although he was acutely aware of the possibility of tension in Danzig leading to war. The Poles had long rejected the suggestion that Germany would confine herself to the revision of the status of the city. They firmly held to the view that any action in Danzig would be part of a major challenge to Polish sovereignty. In Polish-German relations Danzig had become a test of goodwill and both sides viewed the issue as reflecting on the nature of the overall relationship between them.

In the first days of August political tension in Europe rose rapidly. With attention focussed firmly on Danzig, the British Cabinet once more anxiously sought to determine and, if possible, to anticipate Germany's next move. This appeared particularly difficult to do because the Foreign Office was in constant receipt of information from various sources and that information was frequently contradictory. The Cabinet nevertheless chose to believe during its meeting on 26 July that Hitler proposed to put the Danzig issue into cold storage.¹ This assumption was supported by reports from Burckhardt who had recently spoken to the Danzig Gauleiter Forster. Two statements made by Forster seemed to offer scope for hope. The first was that Hitler appeared to be prepared to negotiate with the Poles on the basis of the offer made in October 1938. The second, which came as a great relief to the Cabinet, appeared to indicate that Hitler was not likely to challenge the Poles in the near future, preferring to defer the matter until some later date. Thus the Cabinet discussed the possibility of communicating to Mussolini a message expressing the hope that he would prevail upon Hitler to postpone the settlement of the issue.

Although there appear to be few strikingly new attitudes assumed in the discussion which took place in the Cabinet that day, the wavering and irresolute attitude of the Ministers, and the disillusionment and bewilderment that the British politicians had felt since March, was apparent in the rhetorical question Halifax felt compelled to pose concerning Germany: 'Did it mean that they were impressed by the firm attitude of the Peace Front? Was it a blind cover to cover up their real activities? Or did it mean that Germany was now directing her action elsewhere?'

The intractable predicament in which the Cabinet found itself concerning the possibility of further German aggression in Central Eastern Europe and now in relation to the possibility of a crisis over Danzig, remained. The Cabinet members were quite clearly nervous and weary of Danzig and at the same time increasingly doubted the sincerity of Hitler's public pronouncements and official statements. The fear that Britain would stumble into war because of the Poles' stubbornness was foremost in their minds. Halifax displayed the dilemma over future policy, when at the Cabinet meeting on 2 August he emphasised that, although the tendency had been to assume that 'we were committed to fight for Danzig', the true position was that 'Danzig of itself should not be regarded as providing a *casus belli*. If, however, a threat to Polish independence arose from Danzig, then this country would clearly become involved.'²

During Ironside's visit to Poland the Polish General Staff had made it clear that they would not tolerate any attempt by the Danzig Senate to pass a vote for incorporation of the city in the Reich. Among some Polish military chiefs and politicians, opinions had been expressed in support of challenging Germany early, as the financial burden of the state of semi-mobilisation was considerable. There was also a notable ignorance of Germany's true fighting capacity. On 18 August, in his conversation with Szembek, Koc, head of the financial mission to Britain, expressed an optimistic belief that Germany's military position was not good.³

The open remilitarization of Danzig and the progressive erosion of Polish rights caused Beck to consider putting into effect a plan he had conceived earlier for a *démarche* to the Senate. The excuse Beck was seeking arose on 1 August when the Senate gave the Polish government notice of its intention not to recognise the Polish customs inspectors who were in fact customs guards. These inspectors had earlier been appointed by the Polish government to stop smuggling. Beck moved swiftly instructing the Polish Ambassadors abroad to inform the governments to which they were accredited of his decision to warn the Senate that this was outside the jurisdiction of the Senate, and constituted interference in Polish prerogatives. Beck also took the opportunity to point out that this event 'did not support the assertion that there was a relaxation of tension in Danzig, of which Burckhardt had been constantly and irresponsibly informing'.⁴ The Polish note to the Senate was duly delivered and Beck was able to inform Kennard on 5 August of the success of his

action, Greiser, the President of the Senate, withdrew the original notice.⁵ Poland believed that she had won in a test of strength between herself and Germany.

Tension in Danzig nevertheless rose to a pitch when it was reported that Germany was taking the Senate's side and issued an official note to the Polish government.⁶ The communication contained a warning that any threats or reprisals against the Senate of the Free City would lead to the deterioration of Polish-German relations. Beck's answer to this threat, no doubt encouraged by the apparent victory in his dealings with the Senate, was to refute German claims to have a right to interfere in matters which did not involve Germany directly.

The Polish handling of the crisis was precisely the sort of development that inspired fear in the British government. Beck had informed the British of his proposed action, he nevertheless did not consult them with the aim of seeking their advice. He had also acted on the assumption that a provocation should be answered with threats in order to preempt it. Raczyński, when reporting the content of his conversation with Halifax on 2 August, during which he informed the British Foreign Secretary of Poland's proposed approach to the Senate, said that Halifax was satisfied with explanations of the situation and furthermore 'expressed the admiration of the British government for the restraint which the Polish government had been showing'.⁷

From the Polish point of view another issue cast a long shadow over Anglo-Polish relations and that was the case of the Franco-British-Soviet talks. The Poles appeared to be fearful of the possibility of being dragged into war in the wake of that political arrangement. During his conversation with Halifax on 2 August, Raczyński stressed that nothing should be implied to the Russians which could conceivably be interpreted as giving them a say in Polish affairs.⁸

Initially, at least, the British appeared not to have been too worried about Polish action over Danzig. In his conversation with Raczyński on 10 August, Halifax once more expressed himself as having been 'assured that in any situation which might develop, M. Beck would realize that he was deciding not only for Poland but that his action might also vitally affect ourselves'.⁹ Halifax did, however, have second thoughts about the Polish handling of the crisis. In a letter to Cadogan summarising the conversation with Raczyński,

Halifax gave vent to his fears concerning Beck's earlier plan to threaten the Senate. He suspected that Raczynski's communication was made in the hope of obtaining consent for Polish action against Danzig. Thus Halifax stressed that 'the conditions of our guarantee to Poland are not such as to bear independent extension'.¹⁰ Cadogan was instructed to inform Kennard of the conversation Halifax had with Raczynski and it was to be impressed upon him that 'we must make it plain that our guarantee was not a blank cheque . . . consultations *before* instead of *after*'.

As in the case of earlier crises, Britain found herself trailing in the wake of an impending conflict. In the absence of decisions for action to forestall such conflict the British civil servants and their ministers were once more forced into the uncomfortable situation of trying to work out the best response to events already taking place. The Foreign Office was acutely aware of the need to retain Polish confidence and not to undermine their morale. Still referring to the case of Polish action in response to the Senate note, Cadogan wrote to Kennard on 10 August that 'I felt that one might at least differentiate between those cases where Poland reacted to a hostile initiative by the other side and those in which she felt compelled to take an initiative herself.'¹¹

Had the British wanted to, they would undeniably have recognised the full extent of German preparations for attack on Poland. For in addition to frequent reports of clashes taking place in Danzig, the German government was reported as having added the question of the Polish treatment of national minorities to the well-publicised list of grievances against the Polish state. On 11 August Burckhardt had a meeting with Hitler in which the latter threatened to attack Poland. But as Burckhardt reported to the British, Hitler also assured him that 'if the Poles left Danzig absolutely calm and did not attack German prestige, he could wait. But he added, one condition was that the suffering of the German minority in Poland should cease'.¹² On 17 August Kennard reported that tension had arisen on the Silesian frontier.¹³

From Berlin Henderson was taking the initiative in trying to reopen Polish-German talks with the aim of returning Danzig, and possibly also the Corridor, to Germany.¹⁴ Earlier on 10 August the Foreign Office was informed of the content of talks arranged by a Swede named Dahlerus between Goering and British businessmen. The result of the meeting was that Goering insisted that war could be

averted if Danzig were incorporated into Germany. The return to the old concept of the Four Power Pact was also mentioned.¹⁵ A suggestion was made to the Poles that they should re-open talks with Germany. This proposal Beck did not reject and in fact he later confirmed that Lipski had accepted an invitation from Goering to hunt stag.¹⁶ In the third week of August it briefly seemed to the British as if a conflict could still be averted. At the Cabinet meeting of 22 August an opinion was expressed that two recent conflicts had been resolved satisfactorily, but it was also noted that the minorities question appeared to be the next problem on the agenda.¹⁷

The fact that the Cabinet appeared to be relieved that the conflict had been averted is understandable. What is surprising though is that this was the only aspect of the situation which was discussed. The conclusion can only be that in spite of the general international tension, the open stationing of German troops on the Polish border and similar signs of the impending conflict, the British clung to the old policy of 'quarantining'. In all the Cabinet discussions concerning the City of Danzig in the last week of peace, no attempt was made by Chamberlain or Halifax to lift the conflict from the ranks of a purely local difficulty to that of an issue of broader European significance.

In a letter to Hilda dated 30 July Chamberlain wrote that on the one hand he considered that 'Hitler now recognised that he can't get anything else without a major war and has therefore decided to put Danzig into cold storage.' On the other hand, he also wrote that he feared that British strategy of containment would have the effect of forcing Hitler to take retaliatory measures if he was not to be seen as weak and frightened.¹⁸ The critical matter of Polish and German relations in which Danzig was a mere reflection of the dangerous potential inherent in the further deterioration of the situation was on the whole not discussed outside the specialised environs of the Foreign Office.

But the Polish perspective of the situation was considerably different. The Poles were still doubtful of Britain's commitment to fight for Poland and at the same time the Anglo-Franco-Soviet talks were increasing their unease. Nor had Beck ever been willing at any stage to surrender decision-making to Britain. Although willing to assure the British of his determination not to be provoked, Beck continued to assert the Polish and solely Polish right to make the final decisions concerning her interest in Danzig. Clearly aware of the growing

German threat to Poland and the continuation of daily provocations in Danzig, Beck remained equally distrustful of British and French interference which he suspected was being exercised through the League High Commissioner, Burckhardt.

In his conversation with Szembek on 12 August Beck expressed the opinion that Burckhardt's visit to Germany was highly suspicious and possibly hid 'a suspect Anglo-French game'.¹⁹ His distrust of Poland's allies and the fear that they might try to impose a new Munich on Poland was accentuated by information which left no doubt in his mind that Germany was preparing for aggression in the near future. Thus he anticipated that German mobilization would be completed by 14 August and also noted the exceptional measures taken by the German government, such as the requisitioning of private cars, which he considered to be associated with plans for war. His suspicion that France and Britain would abandon Poland, or at least make a settlement with Germany, as a result of which Poland would have to acquiesce to German demands or else lose the support of the western powers, increased *pari passu* with his growing awareness that Germany had decided to make war on Poland.

On 15 August Beck instructed all Polish legations that he had informed the French and British Ambassadors that he disapproved of Burckhardt's visit to Hitler because he suspected that Danzig was the subject of their talks. The final paragraph in particular belies any suggestion that Britain and France might have had, at this late stage, any influence over Beck. Having accused Burckhardt of conducting talks behind Poland's back, he concluded 'I have warned, that in the case of any attempt to trade our interests I shall take decisive action against Germany, against the League of Nations, and finally against any allied power which would associate itself with these moves.'²⁰

The agreement signed by the British and Poles at the end of Beck's visit to London on 4-6 April was to serve as a basis for an Agreement of Mutual Assistance, the text of which was to be fully negotiated subsequently. Nevertheless in the following months the Foreign Office occupied itself with the Anglo-Soviet talks and the conclusion of the agreement with Poland was delayed. However unwillingly Chamberlain's Cabinet sought an alliance with the Soviet Union, it was apparent that the talks with the Poles could be conveniently delayed until the extent of Soviet support could be ascertained. Nevertheless, the French, who had in fact completed negotiations

with the Poles aimed at defining the extent and scope of military support to be given to Poland, refused to sign their agreement with Poland. They were clearly anxious for the British to define the extent of their involvement before they did so.

Before even the Poles had raised the question of concluding the Anglo-Polish agreement, the French Ambassador enquired from the British what was the proposed date for finalising the agreement with the Poles. In a conversation with Halifax on 5 June the French Ambassador stressed that they were under pressure from the Poles to sign their undertaking, which they were unwilling to do as long as the British refused to define the scope of their obligations to Poland.²¹ The request was repeated on 14 June and Cadogan explained that no progress had been made beyond that of exchanging drafts. The British side admitted that they were unwilling to proceed with negotiations with the Poles as long as the Anglo-Franco-Soviet agreement was still not finalised.²²

The Poles do not appear to have pressed for the hasty conclusion of the agreement. On 13 July Beck declared himself satisfied with the course of exchanges, and said that he considered the British draft proposal to be acceptable with minor changes. These were mainly the clauses in the British proposal referring to the League of Nations which Beck wanted to have removed.²³

Towards the end of July and the beginning of August, however, both sides became anxious to complete the agreement. The Poles found the tension in Danzig increasingly disturbing, while German propaganda concerning the minorities was also mounting. In his conversation with Halifax on 2 August Raczynski requested the resumption of talks. The record of the conversation reveals that there could be little doubt in the Poles' minds that, although the British did not propose to proceed with haste, the main reason for their willingness to re-open the talks was the failure of the Moscow negotiations.²⁴ Raczynski noted that Halifax did not expect the resumed talks to be concluded soon. It was assumed that the opening of staff talks would be used by the Russians as a pretext for prolonging the negotiations. The Anglo-French-Soviet talks had in fact ground to a halt in the opening days of August. The question of defining 'indirect aggression' proved to be one of the stumbling blocks, and the political negotiations ended inconclusively. The staff talks also seemed to promise little progress.²⁵ In spite of this, and surprisingly unperturbed by the general tension prevailing in

Europe, Halifax was not prepared to make any exceptional arrangements for the speedy conclusion of the Polish agreement.

On 10 August Raczynski, who had urgently requested the opening of negotiations, was informed by Strang that the earliest occasion on which the talks could be resumed was 16 August.²⁶ Halifax explained to Raczynski that the British were now prepared to complete the talks with the Poles, irrespective of any developments in the negotiations with the Soviet Union.²⁷ On 14 August Raczynski received a letter from Halifax informing him of British consent to commence talks aimed at completing the text of the agreement.

In spite of the previous lack of urgency, Halifax now stressed that he was prepared to start talks as soon as the Polish legal adviser would be available.²⁸ Once more the reason behind this change of heart lay in the progress of the talks between France, Britain and the Soviet Union. On 11 August the Franco-British Staff delegations had arrived in Moscow to start military talks. The political discussions had been postponed pending the outcome of these exchanges, and were in fact never resumed. The first military talks revealed great differences of opinion between the two sides. During the meeting which took place on 14 August Marshal Voroshilov touched upon the thorny question of the eastern front. The Russian demands were for a clear and viable plan for fighting in the east. The British had no plans for such a campaign as the delegation had hoped to be able to avoid committing itself in this respect.²⁹

As the British hastened to conclude the text of the agreement with Poland, Halifax, in one of his communications with Raczynski, stressed the fact that the two drafts revealed big differences. The proposals were supposed to be based on the set of principles agreed at the conclusion of Beck's visit to London in April. The Declaration, reciprocal in principle, named Germany as the enemy and included an important clause which specified that it would operate in the event of attack by Germany on Poland or alternatively: 'In the event of other action by Germany which clearly threatened Polish independence, and was of such nature that the Polish Government considered it vital to resist it with their national forces.' The above clause was intended to cover the case of German action in Danzig. Ambiguities nevertheless remained as to the precise nature of a German threat which would make the obligation operative. It was hoped by the British that any action by the Danzig Senate to join with the Reich, would not constitute circumstances in which the

Poles would resort to action which could theoretically draw the British into a Danzig conflict.

In the second section of the declaration outstanding issues were referred to. These included the question of Rumania, about which the Poles promised to consult to see if it could be included in the Anglo-Polish defence agreement. On the other hand the British defined the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland and Denmark as vital to her security and it was hoped to agree that Poland would come to their assistance if Britain became involved in defending them against Germany.³⁰

As has been mentioned earlier, on his return to Poland Beck made it clear that he did not propose to include Rumania in the scope of the agreement and he persistently refused to consider the extension of the Polish-Rumanian Treaty of Guarantee of 26 March 1926 to include the case of attack by any country other than the Soviet Union. Nor was he prepared to open discussions with the aim of reaching provisional agreements, claiming throughout that any action of this type would endanger what was seen by Beck, as the somewhat precarious independence that Hungary was retaining in her relations with Germany. A strengthening of Polish-Rumanian contacts, it was feared by Beck, might cause Hungary to finally commit herself to siding with Germany.

The Polish proposal for the Agreement of Mutual Assistance was bilateral in character and included a Secret Protocol. The conditions in which the commitment became operative were defined as those 'threatening the vital interests of one of the High Contracting Parties (Art. I)'.³¹ Article II stated that Article I would come into effect if one of the signatories was threatened directly or indirectly, while Article III included the case of economic penetration. Finally Article VI of the Polish proposal specified that no negotiations would be conducted or concluded without the agreement of both parties.

The Secret Protocol specified the obligations which had been made in general in the text of the agreement. Germany was thus named as the country against which the agreement was being concluded. It was also envisaged that discussions would take place to agree on contingent action which would fall within the scope of Article II. The third point of the protocol was the most important one in so far as it envisaged action taken against Danzig and Polish rights therein as included in the threatening action referred to in Article III. At the same time the following countries were named as

vital to the security of both sides; Belgium, Denmark, Holland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Notably absent from the list of countries was Rumania, whose case Beck had promised to consider, while the addition of the Baltic States provided for the possibility, previously not discussed between the British and the Poles, of German attack from that direction.

The British proposal for the Anglo-Polish Agreement was presented to the Foreign Policy Committee on 20 June. Two memoranda accompanied the draft, one from Cadogan and the second from Malkin, the legal adviser to the Foreign Office.³² In his memorandum Malkin explained that the draft for the agreement with Poland had been prepared on the assumption that some treaty would be concluded with the Soviet Union. Thus while trying to avoid naming Germany as the aggressor, a clause would be included in all articles of the agreement specifying that it would operate in cases of hostilities against a European Power 'not given an assurance of assistance against aggression'.³³ In this way it was hoped to prevent Britain from being drawn into war against the Soviet Union. At the same time British unwillingness to name Germany would have posed a technical problem in that the agreement would operate also against Italy. It was considered likely that the Poles would object to an agreement which would appear to oblige them to declare war on Italy even if Germany was not involved.

A glance at Article III and Article IV reveals immediately the extent to which the British appeared to be proposing to water down the obligations assumed in the Declaration signed between the two parties in April. Article III of the British proposal provided for the guarantee becoming operative in the event of an 'attempt to undermine the independence of Poland or the United Kingdom by processes of economic penetration'. It was pointed out by Malkin that although technically bilateral, the article in effect would be referring only to the possibility of German economic penetration of Poland. Since Danzig was not to be mentioned in the British proposal, it should be assumed that Article III referred to the case of German action against Polish economic rights in the Free City.

It is worth mentioning that by avoiding the naming of Danzig the British would have guaranteed a loophole for themselves. In view of the above, Article IV appears even more surprising for, unilateral in character, it provided for Poland to defend Britain in the case of her taking action against Germany in the event of the latter threatening

‘the independence or neutrality of another European State in such a way as to constitute a menace to the security of the United Kingdom’. The unilateral character of this clause would appear to be surprising, for though it clearly referred to the case of German attack on the Low Countries, Poland would be given an opportunity to name important countries, vital to her security, notably the Baltic States.

The memorandum and the draft were discussed at the Foreign Policy Committee meeting on 20 June. Malkin explained, in connection with Article I, that it was considered imprudent to name Germany. It was thus agreed that if the Poles raised the question of the agreement becoming operative against Italy, they would be given an assurance that Britain would not require Polish assistance in that case.³⁴ The discussion concentrated also on the merits of making Article III bilateral and Article IV, which it was admitted would cover the case of German aggression against Belgium, Holland and Denmark, unilateral. The suspicion that Britain was trying to assure for herself Polish support without a corresponding obligation to defend Poland is borne out by Malkin’s comment in which he stated that

the Polish Government might on reconsideration, on grounds of reciprocity, ask us to guarantee Poland in the event of a German invasion of Lithuania in the same way that they would be guaranteeing Great Britain in the case of an invasion of Holland or Belgium. In order to avoid this new commitment it might be preferable to compromise with the Poles by offering them a unilateral Article III.

A glance at the content of Article III shows that the changing of its character to a unilateral one did not offer the Poles anything nor strengthen or tighten the agreement as a whole. The issue was clearly merely a bargaining point as Britain was unlikely to face the kind of economic penetration against which she would need Polish support. The issue was not resolved at that meeting, since the Prime Minister expressed the fear that Britain would be automatically forced to defend Poland in the event of German aggression against Lithuania, while the Chancellor of the Exchequer voiced his doubts as to whether the Poles would accept Article IV as proposed by the British. Towards the end of the discussion it was proposed to include a reference to the League of Nations.

This addition seems rather surprising in view of the fact that the League was seen by the British as verging on political bankruptcy. Although this was not in connection with the arrangements with

Poland, but in relation to the agreement that Britain hoped to reach with the Soviet Union, Chamberlain when insisting on the inclusion of League principles, was intending to reduce the scale of the obligations that Britain would be assuming. In his letter to his sister, Hilda, dated 28 May, the Prime Minister stated that, 'It is really a most ingenious idea for it is calculated to catch all the misgivings and at the same time by tying the thing to Article XVI we give it a temporary character. I have no doubt that one of these days Article XVI will be amended or repealed and that should give us the opportunity of revising our relations with the Soviet if we want to.'³⁵ Although this comment was made in connection with the Soviet agreement it does serve as an example of Chamberlain's attitude towards the League Covenant and consequently cast further doubts as to the permanence and seriousness which the British government attached to the agreement with the Poles which they hoped to tie to the principles of the League in a similar way.

The Polish and British drafts, in spite of their appearance of similarity, did contain considerable differences. The most important talks concerning the final form of the agreement took place initially between the Polish Ambassador and Kulski, the legal adviser to the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Strang, Cadogan, Fitzmaurice and Malkin on the British side. The details were nevertheless discussed between Fitzmaurice and Kulski only. A note made after the talks by Fitzmaurice indicated that the British hoped initially to bargain over the Polish objections to the British proposals. The Poles insisted on excluding all references to the League. The British appeared to be willing to accept the idea of a Secret Protocol in which Germany would be named as the potential enemy. The Poles still refused to include Rumania in the guarantee, while Britain was prepared to leave Denmark out.³⁶

Cadogan's memorandum accompanying Fitzmaurice's note is very revealing, for in it he sets out the points of the deal the British were prepared to bargain away with the Poles. Cadogan wrote the memorandum on receiving information from Moscow of the conclusion of the Non-Aggression Pact between Germany and the Soviet Union. He considered this fact to be important in so far as it was hoped that the Poles' anxiety to conclude the agreement would force them to give in on several outstanding points of discussion. Consequently Cadogan advised the abandonment of any reference

to the League but it was hoped to press the Poles to include a reference to Rumania. The alternative proposal was to refuse to guarantee Latvia and Estonia unless the Poles agreed to include Rumania. Cadogan's note further reveals that it was still hoped to salvage some agreement with the Soviet Union. Finally, Cadogan recommended that the Poles be prevailed upon to abandon all references to Lithuania and leave Danzig as the only area vital to Polish security, while Belgium and Holland would be named as important to British security.³⁷

The issues arising out of the meetings between the Polish representatives and the British Foreign Office officials were discussed at a meeting of the Foreign Policy Committee on 25 August. Halifax circulated to the meeting a memorandum based on Cadogan's recommendations. Most of the differences were now considered to be insignificant and Halifax took the view that it was unnecessary to insist on references to the League and Rumania.

Danzig remained nevertheless the single insurmountable obstacle to full agreement. The single paragraph of the memorandum dealing with this subject reveals all the contradictions of British policy towards Danzig. The inconsistency between the illusory policy of attempting to avert war, and the inexorable and inescapable reality of imminent war appeared even more stark as apprehension about the fate of the city accumulated in the last days of August. The Poles had hoped to insert in the Secret Protocol a reference to Danzig which would anticipate any direct or indirect action 'against the existence of Danzig as a Free City independent of Germany and against the rights of Poland, therein'.³⁸ Halifax once more raised the fear that in this way Poland would force Britain to act in the case of action aimed at changing the status of the Free City, even if that action, according to the British did not necessarily threaten Polish independence. Halifax concluded that: 'On the one hand, we do not want to give the Polish Government *carte blanche* over Danzig. On the other, we do not want to cause doubts as to our intentions.'³⁹

The phrase does not appear to be surprising in its substance for it merely reflected well known fears. However, in view of the rapidly changing circumstances, particularly the dramatic shift in the balance of power precipitated by the conclusion of the German-Soviet Pact of Non-Aggression, it is startling to note that no new departure in British foreign policy was envisaged for the time being.

For Britain could no longer deceive herself as to the extent and nature of German aims not merely towards Danzig but towards Poland and Eastern Europe as a whole.

Halifax's recommendations were accepted by the Committee of Foreign Affairs and the dilemma concerning Danzig was resolved by tying it to paragraph 1 of Article II of the agreement which provided for support in the event of 'action by a European Power which clearly threatened, directly or indirectly, the independence of one of the Contracting Powers, and was of such a nature that the Party in Question considered it vital to resist it with its armed forces'.⁴⁰

It is possible that the formula reached in the discussion was not favoured by the majority of the committee members for it was clear that the British government would have preferred to make all references to Danzig as unspecific as possible. The clause which was ultimately agreed upon did nevertheless preclude the possibility of Britain fighting as a result of a minor localised incident. The discussions of the Foreign Policy Committee appear nevertheless to have been overshadowed by the implications of the Soviet-German agreement. Few attempts were made to bargain with the Poles and it must have been appreciated that however insignificant the signing of the Anglo-Polish agreement was now, it provided a symbolic counter-balance to the German and Soviet action.⁴¹

Raczyński in his autobiography states that the news of the Soviet-German talks and proposals for a treaty received on 22 August had the effect of causing the British to postpone the conclusion of the agreement with Poland. Only on 25 August did Halifax, who appeared to agree with Raczyński's assertion that the gesture was required to give proof of the determination of the allies, give his consent for the agreement to be finally signed.⁴² In practice, nevertheless, Britain remained militarily and financially uncommitted to the creation of the eastern front. Danzig continued to be seen as a potentially explosive issue, whose timely removal from the sphere of international politics could still postpone the inevitable outbreak of war.

The question of military aid to Poland had not been resolved in the talks with the French and Poles in May, June and July. At the meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence on 22 June the question of aerial attack on Germany was raised once more in order to consider some form of action which could relieve the burden of any German attack on Poland. The Chiefs of Staff appeared to be some-

what disquietened by the apparent lack of any plans to exploit on the western front any German involvement in the east. The question was effectively avoided by the Prime Minister who steered the discussion towards the hardly more relevant topic of the possible effect that the British attack would have on Italy.⁴³ Thus the subject of an aerial attack on Germany in the event of the latter taking aggressive action against Poland was temporarily shelved. It nevertheless appeared to be a source of a certain amount of unease during the last weeks of peace.

The principle upon which all military talks and discussions concerning Poland were to be based in the weeks preceding the outbreak of war was finally laid down in the Chiefs of Staff memorandum of 18 July 1939. In Part III of the said memorandum it was stated:

As a general point, we would emphasise that the fate of Poland will depend upon the ultimate outcome of the war, and that in turn, will depend upon our ability to bring about the eventual defeat of Germany and not on our ability to relieve pressure on Poland at the outset. This must therefore be the overriding consideration which governs our choice of action.⁴⁴

The above principle was applied not only in determining the limited material aid that it was proposed to give to Poland, but also any military action envisaged at the outbreak of war. If war broke out then the consequent restrictions on British trade, particularly on the import of strategic materials, and the need therefore to defend her trading routes with her suppliers would become of prime importance. Effectively, then, the fate of Poland as well as the outcome of a German attack in Eastern Europe was of secondary importance.

Nevertheless, unease over the proposed inactivity in the event of a German attack on Poland remained. The British Chiefs of Staff continued to contemplate means whereby some form of aerial action could be initiated, though this was considered only within the strictly accepted limitations of British bombing policy. The official policy governing bombing remained to restrict it to purely military objectives, and to exclude targets which could involve the civilian population. If the British Chiefs of Staff were to re-examine this subject they would require definite instructions from the government, but the Cabinet nevertheless did not issue any new directives.⁴⁵ It was left to the British military chiefs to inform the French of the British proposal. Accordingly, the renewed Anglo-French Staff talks confirmed the joint policy of: 'not initiating air action against any but

purely military objectives in the narrowest sense of the word, i.e. Naval, Air Force and Army establishments, and that as far as possible it should be confined to objectives the attack of which would not involve the loss of civil life'.⁴⁶ The question nevertheless remained as to whether Britain was going to initiate air attacks on Germany irrespective of German action in the west, or would she await a German attack across the Siegfried Line.

On 28 August the Committee of Imperial Defence recommended the acceptance of what became known as Course A. This envisaged the despatch of the Field Force and the Advance Air Striking Force to France, but limited aerial action to attacks against warships at sea. It was pointed out that any unrestricted German air attacks would be seen as an act of perfidy and only then would Britain reconsider her bombing policy.⁴⁷ The important implication of this recommendation was that Britain did not propose to take any decisive action against Germany even in support of any fighting taking place on the eastern front.

The subject was further discussed at a meeting of the Chiefs of Staff. The overall implications of this discussion can only be appreciated if one is aware of the international tension and grim foreboding that gripped Europe at the time. The Chiefs of Staff nevertheless appeared to congratulate themselves on the decision which they had reached. The principles which influenced them were explained as the requirement

to strike a mean between on the one hand so conserving our own resources that our air effort against Germany would be virtually ineffective, and on the other so dissipating our aircraft and personnel on attacking fruitless objectives in the early stages, as would reduce our power to strike effectively at Germany should the gloves come off.⁴⁸

The French Chiefs of Staff appeared not to have been satisfied with the British decision and chose to commit themselves to a bombing policy known as Course B, which involved taking the initiative in aerial bombing, although restricting it to purely military objectives in the narrowest sense of the word. The French, though wholly dependent on British decisions, appeared to be by far more disturbed by the absence of any plans to relieve Poland. They thus proposed to adopt Course B in the hope that it would reduce German pressure on Poland.⁴⁹

The French stand was greeted by the Chiefs of Staff with unveiled hostility. They objected strongly to the French insinuations that

British action would not offer Poland any relief. It was furthermore considered that in view of the need to be prepared for a long war the French and British should 'conserve our resources and not fritter them away'.⁵⁰ The discussion between the French and British delegations clearly brought out differences which had appeared in the talks earlier and have never been resolved successfully. The French spoke of action to relieve Poland. Although unwilling to assume sole responsibility for such action themselves, they felt profoundly disturbed at the absence of any plans whatsoever.

However, the British reaffirmed what had been stated on previous occasions, that they had no plans and proposed to prepare none for action in the event of a German attack in the east. Any strategic moves that were envisaged against Germany were to be purely symbolic in character. It was admitted that the action proposed, which consisted of flying reconnaissance planes and dropping propaganda leaflets, would be of no military consequence. General Gort stressed that the psychological effects of this action had been overlooked and that it would convince the German people 'of the fact that we could bring the war into the heart of the country'.

One cannot but puzzle at the extent of naivety that was contained in Gort's statement that the above action 'would have a great effect on the German population which had not been invaded for a hundred years'.⁵¹ It would be very difficult to decide whether this comment was merely intended as a form of lame explanation of Britain's tacit indifference to the outcome of any German attack in Eastern Europe, while long-term plans were being made for the ultimate defeat of Germany, or did he in fact believe in the effect that British leaflets would have on the German population? The answer may be contained in the plans and memoranda that were prepared, discussing action to be taken at the outbreak of war. These unfortunately still remain closed to the public.

It is important to note at this point that the Foreign Office appeared to disagree strongly with the limited air action proposed by the Chiefs of Staff and accepted by the government. At the Joint Policy Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence which took place on 17 August attention was drawn to Halifax's apparent disagreement with the Chiefs of Staff's recommendation.⁵² His objections were based on the fear that the bombing instructions 'restricted our action to an extent which would alarm our allies and embarrass the Air Force in the execution of their duties'.

There is nevertheless no evidence of Halifax's comments having made any impression, nor did there exist channels other than the Cabinet through which he could enforce his objections. Halifax's stand would appear to be in accord with that which the Foreign Office had exhibited during the financial talks, but which remained effectively unheeded because of the government's determination to pursue a policy of dissociation from Eastern Europe.

The Anglo-French staff talks had resulted as early as April 1939 in the admission by both sides that little would be done to either support Poland in her preparations for war or distract and weaken Germany in the event of her attacking Poland. This admission was nevertheless qualified by a vague promise of co-operation between the Polish and allied air forces. The British Chiefs of Staff did feel uneasy at the apparent lack of any plans for aiding Poland. Their dilemma was made more difficult when it was admitted that the only possible form of aid to Poland once she was attacked would be extensive aerial attack. This however conflicted with the policy of restricted bombing recommended by the Chiefs of Staff and favoured by the Cabinet.

Exchanges between the British General Staff and Polish military mission in Britain from June to August led the Poles to conclude that some form of air support action would be taken by the British to help Poland if the Germans invaded. There is nevertheless no evidence in British government and state papers to substantiate this conclusion. By August talks between the British military leaders were confined to co-operation in terms of policy not action. Thus in a letter addressed to the French staff delegation on 15 August the British stressed 'we are also considering the question of approaching the Polish military authorities with a view to the co-ordination of air operations in war'. The content of this co-operation is explained in a subsequent sentence as 'it appears to us essential that the Poles should subscribe to an agreed policy regarding air bombardment'.⁵³

Equally surprising are the remaining proposals made by the British in the letter to the French. Thus the British military leaders hoped to commit Poland to not attacking any German objectives other than those decided upon in consultation with the British and should 'conform to whatever combined course of action we may agree to adopt when the time comes'.

The British were, in effect, hoping to subordinate Polish military plans to their own strategic requirements, at a time when it was

openly admitted that the defence of Poland against a German attack was not part of British strategy, and that Poland would therefore be defeated in the first few weeks of war. Moreover, in spite of the absence of plans to attack Germany while that country concentrated on her involvement in Poland, the British, if successful, would have effectively circumscribed and restricted Polish defensive actions. There can be little doubt that British military plans were concerned only to a minor extent with Poland, thus the reason for such restrictive co-operation, which would have benefited Poland neither directly nor indirectly, has to be sought elsewhere.

A revealing comment made by an unnamed person at the Chiefs of Staff 311 Meeting appears to place British military plans in the broader perspective of preparation for a long war. He admitted that 'from the political point of view and having regard to the reactions of neutrals it would be to our advantage that Germany should incur the stigma of having initiated attacks on targets involving civilian loss of life'.⁵⁴

The author has been unable to trace the result of this communication to Poland. It would seem safe to suppose that the Poles accepted the British bombing policy guidelines, although no doubt disappointed as they were prepared to go to great lengths to create an impression in Britain of patience and reasonableness, which they hoped would give rise to a degree of realistic co-operation. Instead, Poland was apparently being required to sacrifice herself for the insubstantial propaganda advantage of attaching 'stigma' to the Germans.

In view of the above the establishment of the British and French military missions in Poland appears to have been a purely symbolic gesture. The decision to despatch missions to Poland had been proposed as a joint action during the Anglo-French staff talks. The British military mission headed by General Carton De Wiart, a veteran of the Boer and First World War, arrived in Poland on 24 August. The French mission led by General Faury reached Poland on 23 August.

The instructions issued by the British to their military mission read as a mixture of guilt for not having prepared any plans for aiding Poland and a sincere desire not to see Poland collapse. Thus the object of the mission was described as 'to ensure that the programme of co-operation of the Polish Army in the combined plan as agreed upon in the Staff conversation is carried out'. This grandiose

phrase was followed by an admission of the absence of any plans for co-operation. The second paragraph of instructions to the British military mission to Poland contained an acknowledgement that no direct military support could be given to Poland by the British forces. In view of this the members of the mission were exhorted to give moral support to Poland. It was thus stressed that 'the question of inspiring confidence is of the greatest importance and every opportunity for the exertion of the personal influence of members of the British Mission must be exploited'. Only the final paragraph of the instruction made it clear why the mission was being despatched at all. Its function was to keep the War Office informed of military developments in Poland.⁵⁵

The tension in German-Polish relations which had been apparent throughout the first half of August increased with the open German militarisation of Danzig and the stationing of troops on the Polish border. On 23 August the Danzig Senate declared its decision to revert to the Reich. This pronouncement, which went counter to the League status, was the sort of action which was feared by both the British and the French as likely to lead to the outbreak of war. Beck had consistently warned that any attempt by the Senate to change the status of the city would be seen as a *casus belli*.⁵⁶ The German provocation did not take place in isolation. On 24 August Beck estimated that thirty German divisions had been placed along the Polish-German border.

The last days of peace proved what was known earlier, namely that the initiative did not lie with the British or the French governments. The collapse of the Anglo-Franco-Soviet talks signalled the final defeat of the concept of an eastern front. The variant in which Poland was to play a key role had never materialised and the Anglo-Polish Agreement concluded on 25 August was of no consequence and in spite of its signing could not on its own account add substance to a relationship that had been patently lacking in just that. The other variant of the concept of an eastern front based on the Soviet Union was never fully appreciated by either British politicians or military chiefs. In any case the Germans had clearly outbid Britain and the possibility of the Soviet Union being the ally of Britain's enemy now became an uncomfortable reality.

On the eve of the outbreak of the war attempts were still made by some individuals to resuscitate the concept of a negotiated settlement of German grievances. The efforts of two personalities,

Henderson, British Ambassador to Berlin, and Dahlerus, are curious because of their spontaneous if not individual nature. These were though of no consequence.

The most notable change in the British government's attitude between the time of the Munich conference and the events of late August was that the British Foreign Office and the Cabinet no longer put any faith in Hitler's assurances. The Cabinet discussions of 26, 27, 28 and 30 August all reveal the same dilemma, namely a desire to see negotiations take place between the Poles and Germany, combined with a disinclination to believe any of the assurances offered by Hitler.⁵⁷

Thus no strong pressure was put on the Poles to comply with the German request to despatch immediately a plenipotentiary with full powers to negotiate. At the same time the Poles were asked not to declare full mobilisation, lest it obstruct last minute efforts for conciliation. The result of this was that the Cabinet remained committed to a concept of negotiations but was no longer convinced of the object of these. In effect Britain still hoped to avert the outbreak of war, although the government could no longer persuade itself that a repetition of previously used procedures for dealing with Germany could attain this objective.

The tragedy and the failure of Britain's policy towards Germany in August was that the government could promise Germany nothing except the maintenance of the status quo. The half-hearted pursuit of appeasement on the one hand, and a realistic though timorous appreciation of the undesirability of approving German aims in Europe on the other hand, were the two mutually exclusive themes of British foreign policy which merely blunted Britain's ability to act in the final days of August. The concept of an eastern front was an obvious victim of these contradictions.

8

September 1939: war in the east

It has been asserted that: 'It is difficult to conceive just how any force could have benefited more from the weakness and mistakes of its enemy than the German Army did from those of the Poles in 1939.'¹ The German army had been prepared for war with Poland both in strategic terms as well as political. The signing of the agreement with the Soviet Union removed the last possible unknown element in the army's calculations and thus few, if any, preparations were made for intervention from either the west or the east in the event of a German attack on Poland.²

The conclusion of the Anglo-Polish pact on 25 August briefly caused Hitler to postpone the attack. The element of surprise was lost, but what was gained was full state of mobilisation.³ On 30 August the final order was given by Hitler to attack Poland on 1 September at 04.30 hours and 'at the same time he strictly forbade any offensive action, or indeed anything that might be taken as a provocation, on the western frontiers with France or with the neutral states'.⁴ The attack could not be postponed further as it was feared that the autumn rains would start. This was a point of which the Poles were aware and one which they considered to be a strength in their defensive plans, as they knew the roads to be impassable once autumn started. Unfortunately, the first two weeks of September 1939 enjoyed excellent weather.

The German attack on Poland on 1 September 1939 began at 4.45 a.m. with the bombing of Polish armaments dumps on the island of Westerplatte by the German cruiser Schleswig-Holstein which had earlier docked at the Danzig harbour. In addition, intensive air-raids were carried out against most of the major Polish cities and objects. At 9 a.m. Warsaw was bombed. The Free City of Danzig which had

been the focal point of European attention during August no longer mattered in the face of such consistent attacks on Polish territory. The German attack on Poland was not a response to a minor conflict but a pre-planned and effectively executed military operation which caught the Polish armies unprepared for the scale of the attack and bewildered the military leaders with its success and swiftness.

Although the Danzig issue had been a crucial aspect of Polish-German relations in 1939 and as such it attracted international attention, the conflict over the city was not the reason for the outbreak of the war. In fact in the last days of August, the events taking place in Danzig were overshadowed by the more fundamental collapse of relations between the two states. On 23 August the Senate issued a decree appointing Forster as head of state (*Staatsoberhaupt*). This was a direct challenge to the League and in theory meant the end of League controls. In the days 23 August to 1 September, Polish offices and property were attacked and effectively made inoperative. On 1 September Forster announced the incorporation of the city and adjoining territory into the Third Reich. Burckhardt was instructed to leave Danzig within two hours, a request he was forced to comply with. On the same day Hitler confirmed the return of Danzig to Germany.⁵ By that time little attention was paid to the events taking place in Danzig for international attention was wholly occupied by the generality of the crisis between Poland and Germany rather than its Danzig manifestation.

Poland's military situation was very bad. She was ill-prepared for the ferocity of the German attack. Shortcomings in equipment, armaments and supplies were considerable. Nor had it been possible to make good these deficiencies during 1939. Noël, the French Ambassador to Poland, wrote in November a damning report in which he attacked Poland's rulers for having conducted a policy of co-operation with Germany. But he also accused them of having neglected Poland's material shortcomings.⁶ Indeed, there was a lot to criticise in the behaviour of the Polish military and government leaders, in particular in the sphere of military planning.

But neither the British nor the French government were in a position righteously to accuse Poland of having failed to rectify her deficiencies. It is clear that once Poland fell, both western allies did try to dissociate themselves from this military failure, conveniently overlooking the attitude which both had assumed towards Poland during the 1930s. In particular Noël's statement that 'as the French

General Staff well knew, the Polish army was short of heavy artillery, tanks and bomber and fighter aircraft in which we, in agreement with the British, were doing our best to help them to acquire' is false. Notwithstanding Poland's responsibility for her lamentable state of military planning and preparedness, neither the French nor the British could stand in judgement of the failure of the Polish military effort. Polish military weakness was a well known fact, and as has been shown earlier, her defeat in the event of a German attack, was a foregone conclusion and one with which the military leaders of both states had come to terms in spring 1939. In Western strategic calculations for a European war the collapse of Poland was not of much significance. The defence of her territory was considered to be likely to be too wasteful a military operation to embark upon by either Britain or France.

Nevertheless, it was the question of the eastern front, as it finally emerged out of the fraught dealings of the British and French with potential allies in the east, which was a failure. Britain had effectively backed a country, in so far as she was prepared to become involved in Central and South East European affairs, which she knew would collapse within weeks of a German attack. In that estimation the British were not disappointed, and indeed Polish military disintegration proceeded in accordance with earlier forecasts. But unfortunately, it was the consequences of that correctly predicted collapse which were not fully taken into account. The Soviet-German rapprochement left Britain and France facing the full weight of a German attack on the western front, without even a promise of a friendly attitude on the part of the remaining Central and South East European states. The consequences of the British failure to take a more consistent interest in German expansion eastwards was that it sent shock waves across Europe and in particular among those likely to be the object of German policies and caused these states to espouse neutrality in preference to the poisoned chalice of association with Britain.

On the outbreak of the war, the failure of the concept of an eastern front based on Poland was clearly apparent, as Poland's isolation in Central Eastern Europe was stark. Polish policies during the inter-war period and particularly in the second half of 1938 and throughout 1939, had the result that Poland had developed no close political ties with her immediate neighbours or indeed with any potential allies in Eastern Europe. On the eve of the war Poland was

faced with the fact that all her neighbours were either sympathetic to Germany or unable to exercise any independent policy. There was the anomaly of Rumania and Hungary, both friendly states from whose benevolence Poland could not benefit for fear of upsetting the delicate balance of power in the Balkans, and by a domino effect causing hostilities to take place.

In the north the Polish Corridor was vulnerable to an immediate attack from East Prussia. This potential threat was augmented by the remilitarisation of Danzig by the Germans and the German annexation of Memel on 21 March, an event whose significance was signally underestimated in Europe. Poland's relations with Lithuania had been strained. At the time of the Anschluss Poland had taken the opportunity to issue an ultimatum to Lithuania demanding the resumption of diplomatic contacts. This somewhat flamboyant manner of restoring diplomatic relations between two estranged states could hardly constitute a basis for good relations. Despite this the Lithuanian government was able to withstand German pressure to join in a war against Poland and declared its neutrality in September.⁷

In the east, Poland was reaping the benefits of her traditional anti-Soviet policy. Although, on a diplomatic level, relations were considered to be satisfactory as evidenced by the Non-Aggression Pact and the Agreement of 25 July 1932, which had been confirmed in the autumn of 1938, Beck remained profoundly distrustful of the Soviet Union. Indeed, years of extreme nationalist policies which led to the increase in the number of territorial grievances between Poland and the Soviet Union combined with internal repression, made it well-nigh impossible to execute a policy of rapprochement, had Beck and his supporters even come to appreciate the need for such change.

An anti-German alliance with the Soviet Union could only have been achieved at the expense of Poland relinquishing her claim to the right to expand eastwards and the return of territories which Poland had obtained in the confused postwar period. But the government of the colonels, the heirs to the Piłsudski tradition, were in no position to consider such action. An anti-Soviet position seemed to be an essential element of the monopolistic claim to represent Poland's big power role in Europe. The abandonment of the first would have meant the collapse of the second. The German-Soviet Pact of August 1939, instead of signalling to Beck the final

collapse of his pro-German and anti-Soviet policies, was seen by him solely as a confirmation of his worst suspicions concerning the Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, an element of ambiguity remained in the Soviet attitude towards Poland. On 26 August 1939 Nicolai Sharonov, the Soviet Ambassador to Poland, made a visit to the Polish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 'under the pretext of a second rate front incident and supposedly also to show that in spite of the German-Soviet Pact relations between Moscow and Warsaw remained unchanged'.⁸ A report from the Polish Ambassador in Moscow, Grzybowski, dated 28 August, confirmed this. He reported that the Non-Aggression Pact appeared to have been concluded for tactical reasons and that 'the impression is confirmed that this pact does not pre-determine the Soviet Union's stand in the event of a conflict and is only a starting point for a further game'.⁹ However these minor opinions and moves did not have any influence on the Polish government's attitude towards the Soviet Union.

To the south, Poland had signed on 15 June 1931 a Treaty of Guarantee with Rumania which was chiefly aimed against the possibility of Soviet aggression. Beck had refused to extend the treaty with Rumania to the case of aggression by Germany. In the days preceding the war Beck had gone further and specifically requested Rumania not to intervene on Poland's behalf in the case of a German attack.¹⁰ It was nevertheless assumed by the Poles that the bonds of friendship between the two nations were such that Rumania could be depended upon not to co-operate in any action against Poland or her interests.

It was in the case of Hungary that Beck appeared to have scored a minor victory on the eve of the war. On 28 August the Hungarian Ambassador to London informed Raczynski in utmost confidence that his government had pledged itself to declare neutrality in the event of a German demand of right of passage to the Polish border.¹¹ If Germany tried to march her forces through Hungarian territory the Hungarian government was determined to try and prevent this. This decision had been made at the same time as it was decided to reject a suggestion that Hungary enter into an agreement with Rumania.

While on a political level this decision was important, strategically it was of no consequence, for Germany had free access to the Polish southern border via Slovakia, at the time a German protectorate. On

that same 28th of August Slovak radio made an announcement that 'German troops had entered Slovakia's territory in accordance with the German-Slovak Security agreement.' These preparations were justified by the supposed danger posed by Poland and furthermore the Slovak radio instructed that the German troops should be treated as a friendly army.¹² Beck knew of the stationing of German divisions on the Polish-Slovak border. Thus Poland's two allies in South Eastern Europe, Hungary and Rumania remained, due to their mutual enmity and as a result of Germany's effective control over their economies, of little value to Poland at the time of the outbreak of the war.

The news of the German attack on Poland reached Raczyński via the Polish Embassy in Paris at 10.10 a.m. At 10.30 he sought Halifax to inform him of the event. The meeting was a solemn one and the Polish Ambassador expressed the opinion that 'it was a plain case as provided for by the Treaty'.¹³ Halifax confirmed this view. The Cabinet meeting which took place that same day agreed that indeed circumstances had arisen in which the Anglo-Polish Agreement became operative.¹⁴ Arrangements were made to instruct Henderson to issue the Germans with a final warning which, if rejected, would be followed by a declaration of war. No reference was made to the military aspect of the situation. In fact no military contingencies came into force when the Anglo-Polish Agreement was invoked, for these simply did not exist.

In spite of the rapidly deteriorating European situation, the British Cabinet still sought means of returning the protagonists to the negotiating table and laying down the basis for a settlement. Mussolini's offer of mediation, communicated to Halifax on 31 August was discussed at length. Though little real hope of averting war was attached to the Italian proposal, it did raise hopes for some settlement which would stop German hostilities. As Halifax saw it 'the real point was to get the German government to agree to negotiations'. Hopes for a peaceful solution to the conflict were raised when the German government requested more time to consider a reply to the British final warning made by Henderson.

During the Cabinet meeting on 2 September hopes were raised by Chamberlain and Halifax that a conference could be assembled.¹⁵ The minimum gesture of goodwill expected by the Prime Minister and his Foreign Secretary was that German troops be withdrawn from Polish territory and Danzig be restored to its previous status

under the protection of the League. Surrounding this meeting was a sinister element of *déjà vu*. Chamberlain failed to note that he no longer had the support of a number of ministers. Kingsley Wood, Secretary of State for Air, in particular tried to draw attention to the Air Staff's opposition to the delay in issuing an ultimatum. Hore-Belisha, Secretary of State for War, quoted the General Staff as being unwilling to see any further delay. The Ministers opposed to Chamberlain's vacillations were also voicing the apprehensions of the military chiefs who were in an impossible situation until at least the political decision had been made as to whether Britain proposed to go to war with Germany.

Chamberlain nevertheless failed to take note of the changing mood in the Cabinet and the House of Commons. During the day he was to realise that as long as fighting continued in Poland, neither in Parliament, nor among the Cabinet Ministers did he have support for the extension of the time limit for issuing an ultimatum to Germany. At the second Cabinet meeting of the day, which took place after Chamberlain's disastrous reception in the House of Commons, the Prime Minister admitted that he could not see himself receiving the support of either his hitherto loyal Ministers, nor the members of Parliament.¹⁶

Writing to his sister, Ida, on 16 September, Chamberlain mused on the behaviour of Hitler prior to the British ultimatum.¹⁷ In his letter Chamberlain expressed a belief that it was Hitler's aim to keep Britain out of the war by a quick victory in Poland followed by a settlement. He believed that Hitler had wanted to maintain British goodwill. Hitler's rejection of the British warning he attributed to 'some brainstorm took possession of him – maybe Ribbentrop stirred it up and once he had set his machine in motion he couldn't stop it'.

There was also the difficult question of synchronising British action with the French. If in Britain the government showed a great reluctance to proceed with declaring war, they were well matched by similar dilatory behaviour on the part of the French government.¹⁸ Bonnet's determination to base French action on the hope that the Italian mediation proposal could be accepted was supported by Gamelin's determination that France should not take the initiative by starting hostilities against Germany.

In his memoirs Bonnet stated that the French Constitution had prevented him from declaring war on Germany on the 1st as well as

the 2nd September. Though there is little doubt that it was necessary for the National Assembly to vote in the war budget, this most certainly was not the reason for the delay. He had in fact been in touch with Ciano in the hope that a conference could be successfully convened.¹⁹ Gamelin was also working towards the same aim. Although the excuse put forward by him was that it was necessary to complete the evacuation of children from Paris, and conclude mobilisation plans, both of which he considered likely to be finished not earlier than 4 September.²⁰

Under British pressure the French proposed to deliver an ultimatum to Germany which was to expire between 8 p.m. and 9 p.m. on 3 September. Chamberlain was, however, no longer able to defend his position. At a meeting of the Cabinet at 11 p.m. on 2 September it was decided unanimously to instruct Henderson to deliver an ultimatum at 9 a.m. and at 11 a.m., as a result of not having received an answer from the German government, Britain found herself in a state of war with Germany. Reluctantly the French followed the British lead and their ultimatum to Germany expired at 5 p.m.

From the very beginning of the war it was clear that the issue was not that of whether to defend Poland, the real dilemma was whether to declare war on Germany. The decision to forfeit Poland in the event of an exclusive German attack eastwards had been made earlier and the acceptance of the possible defeat of Poland was a foregone conclusion at the beginning of September. Therefore the discussion of the desirability or otherwise of declaring war was based on the need to balance questions of more direct concern to Britain, namely whether, by not declaring war, Britain was losing an opportunity to establish an advantageous military position and whether Germany would turn next against Britain and France. Writing to his sister Hilda on 17 September, Chamberlain debated just this point:

Poland is about finished now and Hitler will very soon be in a position to move his aircraft and part of his Eastern Army elsewhere. What will he do? Some, including I think our own HQ expect him to build up forces for an attack on the West. I cannot take that view myself. I see no possibility of his scoring a major success in the West.²¹

Nor did Chamberlain believe that Italy was likely to join in the event of a major conflagration, for he wrote: 'I place my hopes and indeed my confidence in the attitude of the Italian King, Church and

people. I do not believe that they will fight us on behalf of Germany.'

In effect, British military action decided upon and taken during September was in no way concerned with the situation on the German-Polish front. Despite its moral and emotional significance the issue of the war raging between two countries, one of them Britain's ally, remained of minor importance in military considerations.

The first meeting of the War Cabinet which took place on 3 September confirmed the general acceptance of this view. The inclusion of Churchill as the First Lord of the Admiralty and Eden as the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs made little difference to the tenor of the discussion. The Cabinet Ministers concentrated on the question of their relations with France and the increasingly acrimonious exchanges with her concerning the taking of the initiative to attack Germany. The lack of advance plans for action against Germany in the event of the first attack being directed eastwards inspired inconclusive discussion about action among Cabinet Ministers and military chiefs, since they were reluctant to admit to outright inaction.

The French were embittered by Britain's unwillingness to use the Air Striking Force against Germany.²² While the Cabinet meeting of 4 September expressed its determination to plan joint action with the French in order to relieve pressure on Poland, the letter sent by Ismay to Gamelin leaves little doubt about the general direction of proposed developments. The demand that the French Air Force abide by previously agreed policies was reiterated. In any event, the only measure which was finally authorised by the War Cabinet other than that of a naval attack on the German Fleet was that of dropping propaganda leaflets over Germany. The Cabinet believed that the sight of the Royal Air Force flying over North West Germany would have a demoralising effect on the population.²³

Polish military plans for resistance to German attack were based upon the premise that there would be aerial action in support of Poland by the British and French. The force and abruptness of the German attack on Poland resulted in the total destruction of the Polish air force while it was still on the ground. Adding to the tragedy of the Poles was the fact that the German air force attacked Polish communications and towns indiscriminately, bombing civilian as well as military targets. The hoped-for allied air support, a hope

which had been harboured by Beck and his generals, appeared to gain strength when it was realised that only a *Deus ex machina*, in the form of a major attack on the German western front, accompanied by a massive assault by the western air forces against Germany, could save Poland from a swift defeat.

During the staff talks with the British, the subject of aerial fighting and the proposals for the establishment of British air bases in Poland were only vaguely touched upon. The Poles nevertheless persuaded themselves that British support was a foregone conclusion. The contradictions between the two sides, not merely in their respective expectations but also in their long-term plans, became obvious during the exchanges that Raczyński had with Halifax in the first days of war. Answering the Polish Ambassador's formal request for air action to relieve pressure on Poland, Halifax warned 'we must none the less keep our main objective, which was the defeat of Germany, clearly before us'. Halifax continued, 'I should feel it wrong to press the military authorities either here or in France to take action, which in their judgement would diminish rather than increase their capacity to put the maximum pressure at the earliest possible moment on Germany.'²⁴

Polish pressure on the British to commence aerial action against Germany became nevertheless increasingly strong and the Air Staff issued a list of reasons for not complying with the desperate Polish pleading. Kennard was furnished with this list in order to assist him in his talks with the Poles.²⁵ Having pointed out that no effective direct assistance could be provided for the eastern front, the Air Staff also stated that no opportunity had arisen to take action on the western front. The crucial argument was nevertheless contained in what clearly was the real and overwhelming reason for inactivity which was summarised as:

Since the immutable aim of the Allies is the ultimate defeat of Germany, without which the fate of Poland is permanently sealed, it would obviously be militarily unsound and to the disadvantage of all including Poland, to undertake at any given moment operations unlikely at that time to achieve effective results, merely for the sake of maintaining a gesture.

The general air of consensus that prevailed concerning the undesirability of taking bombing action against Germany was ruffled when Captain Davies of the British military mission to Poland returned to Britain reporting the indiscriminate nature of German air raids. As a result of this the War Cabinet authorised the

Chiefs of Staff Committee to consider again the question of bombing policy.²⁶ Nor surprisingly, in view of previous statements, the Chiefs of Staff were not prepared to recommend a change in British air striking policy.

Amongst a number of explanations offered was one quoting the undesirability of going counter to an undertaking to Roosevelt and in accordance with his call to restrict bombing to military objects. Yet information received daily from Kennard and the staff of the British Embassy who witnessed bombing raids and, more recently, the report from the British military mission also, left little doubt as to the nature of Germany's attack on Poland. The Chiefs of Staff nevertheless preferred to overlook the suggestion that Germany had taken aerial action against civilians. Thus they proceeded to state that: 'Both Hitler and Goering have publicly affirmed their intention to restrict the operation of the German Air Force. And we have no definite or reliable proof that in fact they have not done so in Poland – though possibly on a somewhat elastic interpretation.'²⁷ The final statement of policy was reiterated in a sentence underlined in the original: '*Consequently, nothing we can do in the air in the Western theatre would have any effect of relieving pressure on Poland.*'

On 13 September the first meeting of the Anglo–French Supreme War Council took place attended by Chamberlain and Lord Chatfield on the British side and Daladier and General Gamelin on the French.²⁸ The minutes of the meeting record a veritable orgy of mutual congratulation at not having succumbed to the temptation of attacking Germany.

Chamberlain started by asserting that 'he thought the decision not to undertake large-scale operations as yet in France had been wise. In his view there was no hurry as time was on our side.' Daladier gave his view that 'The situation was not the same as in 1914'. He added that the French mobilization had been completed successfully and undisturbed. General Gamelin was more specific. 'His offensive was confined to activities in "no man's land" and he had no intention of throwing his army against the German main defences.' Asked whether the French would reconsider their plans if Poland held out longer than had been expected Gamelin said: 'No. It would only give Great Britain and France more valuable time to prepare and prevent the Germans from withdrawing forces from the Eastern to the Western fronts.' Both sides were clearly in agreement.

The German attack on Poland raised the question of the attitude

of the Balkan states towards Germany and their likely reaction to British efforts to commit them to neutrality. On 4 September when writing their memorandum for the War Cabinet on the possible response to the war by Rumania, the Chiefs of Staff appeared optimistic that Rumania would remain neutral. It was hoped that a commitment could be obtained from Rumania that they would not place an embargo on the passage of supplies to Poland. It was concluded that 'all the advantage appear to us to lie in retaining Rumania as a neutral at the outset and thus enabling her to enter the war later when she can have a direct influence on the outcome'.²⁹ But at the Cabinet meeting of 6 September it was hinted that the Chiefs of Staff assessment of the situation might have been unduly optimistic.³⁰ No decision was taken actively to seek benevolent neutrality from Rumania. Indeed at no time after the outbreak of the war was any effort made to secure Rumanian goodwill.

Thus it is clear, that although anxious about Poland's fate, Britain pursued a consistent policy of dissociation from the immediate affairs of Central and South Eastern Europe. The defeat of Poland appeared to be an accepted fact while the possible consequences that this outcome might have on the condemned state of that region of Europe were obviously of little consequence in comparison with long-term plans for a world war which were now being prepared. This opinion is further borne out by the study of the contingencies which were made for the delivery of military supplies to Poland after the outbreak of hostilities.

In spite of the urgent Polish pleas, both financial and material aid had been withheld from Poland during the months preceding the outbreak of the war. Loans had been denied by the Treasury through the application of strict financial criteria. Military and industrial supplies on the other hand were withheld since Poland was not considered of importance in the Chiefs of Staffs' priority list of countries of strategic importance to Britain and her trade routes with the Empire.

As has been shown earlier the Polish military plans were based on the assumption that aerial and material support from France and Britain would be necessary in order to successfully resist a German assault. The Soviet Union and other potential allies in Central and South Eastern Europe were not seen by Beck and the military chiefs as likely to be of any military consequence in a war with Germany. Thus at the time of the attack on Poland, it was virtually assumed by

the Poles, that, in spite of the absence of any plans for military co-operation, some aid would be given. This estimation arose not only out of desperate optimism, but also out of Beck's considered view that Poland was a key factor in Britain's policy towards Eastern Europe and Germany.

The financial talks which had been so unsuccessful from the Polish point of view and had been broken off in August were renewed in the opening days of war. The sums of £5 million and 6 million French francs were granted to Poland by Britain and France respectively in the form of a loan.³¹ Implicit in the agreement was an acceptance of the fact that Poland was going to use the loan to purchase essential materials from the Soviet Union. The Polish Ambassador reported that it was also understood that further monies would be made available as progress was made towards purchase arrangements for military and strategic materials from the Soviet Union. The British Treasury also insisted that any purchases in the west should be made only after prior agreement with the British to prevent unnecessary rivalry.³² Thus the Treasury succeeded not only in maintaining the figure as initially proposed but also committed the Poles to purchases in markets where they would not compete with the British. They had been earlier supported by the Chiefs of Staff who pointed out that the Soviet Union was able to supply the calibre of ammunition used by the Polish army, unlike the British, who used a different calibre of guns.

At the Cabinet meeting of 6 September, Simon reported that an agreement had been reached whereby 'a large deposit of gold at present held by the Bank of England on the Bank of International Settlements' account would in future be held by the Bank of England for the account of a Polish bank in Warsaw'. Thus it was hoped to prevent the Germans from acquiring Polish gold in the manner in which they had obtained Czechoslovak gold in March 1939, after the occupation of Prague.³³

At the outbreak of war the Polish government despatched military missions to France and Britain with the aim of arranging purchases of ammunitions. General Norwid-Neugebauer headed the mission to London, where he arrived on 8 September 1939. The list of materials urgently required by the Poles had been forwarded to the British earlier. In addition to requests for fighter and bomber planes, the list included demands for a variety of guns, machine guns, anti-aircraft guns inclusive of ammunition, lorries and gas masks.

The Deputy Chiefs of Staff made clear that they were not prepared to recommend that the Poles be granted their request. The supplies vital to the Polish war effort were considered equally important to the British state of military preparedness. The Chiefs of Staff, like the Cabinet, considered only the possibility of military aid for Poland coming from stocks already earmarked for British defence. They therefore rejected the suggestion that Poland should be strengthened at the expense of British security. In consequence only 5000 Hotchkiss guns, with their ammunition and gas masks were made available to the Poles. In addition a number of single engine Battle bombers, the purchase of which had been concluded earlier, although at that time final purchase had been made conditional upon a successful conclusion to Poland's financial talks, were prepared for despatch to Poland.³⁴

A member of the British military mission to Poland, Captain Davies, strongly recommended that supplies of munitions be granted to Poland on the grounds that this would be of great moral significance for the embattled ally.³⁵ This recommendation was ignored by the meeting of the Deputy Chiefs of Staff. They suggested instead that Poland should only be allowed to purchase even insignificant supplies in Britain on condition that the French granted sufficient aid to enable the Poles to maintain their defences.

Norwid-Neugebauer's visit to Britain was wholly unsuccessful in so far as he failed to persuade the British military chiefs to offer additional supplies and munitions to those negotiated earlier. Encouraged by what appeared at first impression to be a successful conversation with Ironside, Newall, and Gort, Norwid-Neugebauer requested from the British 100 completely equipped pursuit planes, preferably Hurricanes.³⁶ Newall's answer was a curt one; he informed Norwid-Neugebauer that the Hurricane did not have the necessary range to fly over German territory to Poland; nor were the British prepared to release further fighting planes. Norwid-Neugebauer was finally informed that with the exception of 10,000 Hotchkiss guns and 15–20 million rounds of ammunition, Britain had nothing to offer the Poles. Nor was Britain in the position to undertake the supply of necessary materials within the nearest future. The earliest date when first supplies could be made available for Poland was in five to six months time.³⁷

At the time when Norwid-Neugebauer was being informed of the failure of his mission to Britain it was doubted in Britain whether the Polish forces would manage to retain even a strip of land. At a joint

meeting of Foreign Office officials and the Deputy Chiefs of Staff, on 15 September, the advisability of despatching to Poland any of the supplies which had been earlier authorised, was seriously questioned. The long and precarious routes were an obstacle that made the supply of aid to Poland from Britain a difficult and long-term measure which could not bring results within days and which ought therefore to have been initiated in advance of the crisis.

The Cabinet now instructed the Chiefs of Staff to reconsider the destination of supplies which had been routed through the Mediterranean. One ship, which had already left Britain, was due in Istanbul on 19 September with a supply of planes and ammunition. Three more ships were due to leave very soon. Recognising the fact that Poland was most likely to fall within the next few days the military recommended that the ships should sail from Britain but that they should only be given instructions on how to dispose of their cargo on reaching the Dardanelles. All four ships with supplies to Poland had been routed along routes vital to British trade. Thus, on arrival at the Dardanelles, if Poland had fallen by then the ammunition which had been intended for Poland could then be delivered to some other territory that was even more vital to British interests, notably Turkey or Greece.³⁸ Indeed, the Chiefs of Staff recommended to the War Cabinet that the shipment of armaments for Poland due in Istanbul on 19 September be handed over 'to the Turks as a bargaining counter in the negotiations for a Treaty'.³⁹

None of the supplies which had been negotiated between the Poles and the British in August and later in September reached Poland before her final defeat. Nor did half-hearted British efforts to supply Poland from the Soviet Union come to anything. Similar efforts to persuade Turkey to negotiate with the Soviet Union to obtain Russian agreement for the sale and transfer of ammunition to Poland failed. The Turks refused to act as intermediaries in the deal.⁴⁰ These British attempts to obtain munitions for Poland from the Soviet Union were undertaken after the outbreak of the war and appeared to be initiated without any explicit Polish requests for Britain to act on their behalf. By 10 September, Seeds was able to report from Moscow that there was little hope of obtaining aid for Poland.⁴¹ Thus the only practically available source of material aid to Poland remained totally unexplored during peace time and inaccessible after the outbreak of war.

The Foreign Office memoranda and the Cabinet discussions deal-

ing with the period from the outbreak of Polish–German hostilities up to the collapse of the Polish defences, bear witness to the general embarrassment surrounding the question of British supplies to Poland. A minute by Strang made on the earlier-mentioned Seeds report from Moscow, concerning the possibility of supplies being obtained from the Soviet Union, states that ‘the best means of helping Poland is for us and the French to supply material ourselves and try to get it sent in transit through Rumania as quickly as possible. This is what we are doing.’ In the margin Sargent wrote, ‘Are we?’

The Poles quite clearly found it very difficult to understand the British reasons for inactivity. Raczyński, puzzled and incredulous, sought further elucidation. The explanation that this attitude was necessitated by the position in which Britain was placed by Roosevelt’s declaration seemed to him intuitively implausible.⁴² The American Secretary of State in his conversation with Potocki, Polish Ambassador to Washington, vehemently denied that any pressure had been put by the American government on the British not to aid Poland.⁴³

The desperation of the Polish Ambassador and the Head of the Polish military mission to Britain rose to a pitch when they were informed on 12 September of the further retreat of the Polish army. Norwid-Neugebauer wrote to Ironside, who had so far been most sympathetic towards the Poles, pleading for material aid and the starting of military action to relieve pressure on the Polish army. Invoking the Agreement of Mutual Assistance signed by the two countries, Norwid-Neugebauer stressed the need for swift action.⁴⁴ The answer received from Newall, Chief of the Air Staff, merely reiterated the reasons given earlier and concluded: ‘with regard to all bombing action you ask us to take, you will appreciate that this is a matter which involves the combined major strategy to the war of France and ourselves and that an answer can only be given at the highest plane’.⁴⁵

The paradoxical aspect of the military and Cabinet discussions that were taking place at the time was the unwillingness of the British Ministers and generals to admit that no aid was being given to Poland. None of the agreements signed with Central and South East European countries had been more than bluffs in Chamberlain’s continued policy of appeasement. The purposefulness of these gestures was constantly being vitiated in order not to preclude the

possibility of reaching negotiated settlements to German demands in Eastern Europe. The guarantee to Poland had more to do with obtaining leverage with Poland in order to force her to the negotiating table, than with the defence of Poland from aggression. When it became apparent that Poland was likely to be defeated within a few weeks, as had been earlier predicted, the Chiefs of Staff appeared unwilling to admit even to themselves that the immediate fate of Poland was of little consequence to Britain's long-term aim of defeating Germany.

In a Chiefs of Staff committee report dated 13 September it was clearly stated that the establishment of a defensive front by the Poles would be an advantage to the British 'and we therefore ought to give them all the moral and material support that is possible'.⁴⁶ At the same time the meagre supplies obtained by Norwid-Neugebauer and despatched to Poland through Turkey, and supplies which amounted in total to 44 planes and 5000 Hotchkiss guns, were enumerated as if they indeed amounted to the 'material support and expectations of a regular stream of deliveries from us'. The most puzzling feature of this memorandum is the unwillingness to admit that it was not considered at present to be in the British interest to fight for Poland, a fact of which the Polish Ambassador and the head of the military mission had been openly informed on several occasions. There appears to be no obvious explanation for this particular attitude other than an apprehension of expressing views which would clearly run counter to the general state of public opinion at a time when Poland was still fighting.

The possibility of the Soviet Union entering the conflict was considered seriously in connection with a report by the British Ambassador to Moscow. Seeds informed the government that Soviet propaganda was emphasising that revolution had broken out in Poland. He further stated 'I am inclined to think our apparent impotence on the Western front and rapid German progress in Poland must be a great temptation to the Soviet Government to make sure of anything they may have been promised by the Germans.'⁴⁷

Somewhat belatedly Poland's Foreign Minister awoke to the dangerous possibility of the Soviet Union not honouring her Non-Aggression Pact with Poland. On 17 September, acting on instructions from Beck, Raczynski raised with the Foreign Office the issue of the interpretation of the Secret Protocol attached to the Agree-

ment of 25 August. In an obvious attempt to utilise the already clearly useless agreement the Poles hoped that Clause 1 (B) of the Protocol which referred to the 'European Powers other than Germany' could be considered to include the Soviet Union. Thus the Ambassador stated that 'he realised that His Majesty's government had probably throughout had in mind Italy. But his Government had throughout had in mind the Soviet.'⁴⁸ Beck nevertheless could no more force the British to defend Poland against Soviet action than he could persuade them to open a western front.

The Cabinet meeting of 18 September discussed the subject of the Soviet invasion of Poland. Opening, Halifax pointed out that the provisions of the Anglo-Polish Agreement did not apply to the case of Soviet aggression. The discussion which subsequently took place merely confirmed the existing state of affairs. The Soviet invasion of Polish territory was not considered to have altered the situation and Chamberlain declared that: 'His Majesty's Government still retained complete confidence that on the conclusion of the war Poland would be restored.'⁴⁹ Ultimately it was decided to confine British action to that of issuing a formal protest.

The Poles nevertheless did hope for some stronger expression of British disapproval. A note handed to Halifax on 18 September by Raczynski contained a statement that 'the Polish Government reserve the right to invoke the obligation of its allies arising out of the treaties now in force'. Halifax let it be known that any assumption that the treaty could be interpreted to include, among the contingencies provided for, Soviet aggression was incorrect. He considered that 'we are free to take our own decision and to decide whether to declare war on the USSR or not ...'⁵⁰ Thus the final Polish attempt to activate the Anglo-Polish Treaty was doomed to failure. Britain's determination to dissociate herself from East European politics, particularly German expansionism, by means legal or otherwise, was extended to all other political developments in Eastern Europe. It is also startling to note the lack of debate and discussion within Cabinet meetings concerning Soviet action.

As Polish resistance collapsed Britain realised that Rumania was effectively lost too. Not that this appeared to have been noted with alarm. Continuing with the previous, somewhat clumsy and inconsistent policies relating to the whole of the Balkan region, the Cabinet was abruptly disabused when it was forced to realise that Rumania was not fulfilling the role of a benevolent neutral country

in the Polish–German conflict.⁵¹ The Cabinet was informed on 20 September that the Polish government, which had withdrawn from Poland and which had been assured a right of passage through Rumania, had found it impossible to leave. Belatedly it was realised that Britain had no means of putting pressure upon a supposedly friendly neutral country which was clearly acting in accordance with German instructions.⁵²

The subject of the utilisation of Polish manpower resources was raised as a marginal issue in a report by Kennard on 13 September. Beck had apparently hoped that Polish trained air personnel could be sent to Egypt or Syria where they could be provided by the British with aircraft. He also hinted that they might then return to fight on the eastern front.⁵³ The idea did not find support with the Foreign Office. However, the final defeat of Poland did raise the question: of creating a Polish army in the west, an idea which was supported by the Polish government. The detention of that government in Rumania also posed the necessity of establishing a Polish government in exile. The main reason for the establishment of a government in exile was in order to tap Polish resources. This was admitted at the meeting of the Cabinet on 21 September. It was intended that Polish naval units, but primarily trained personnel, could be employed in the creation of a western front.⁵⁴

The collapse of Poland therefore opened a new chapter in Anglo–Polish relations. It was assumed throughout, on the British side, that the ultimate fate of Poland would depend on the final defeat, at some unspecified time in the future, of Germany. This was also a piece of rhetorical ritual that effectively enabled Chamberlain to avoid the commitment that Britain had under the March guarantee to defend Polish territory from aggression. Having had her territory now abandoned to German occupying forces, Poland entered a period of waiting for the promised defeat of Germany during which she existed merely as a legal fiction that was almost destitute, and which had nothing to offer but its gold and the services of those Polish combatants who managed to escape to the west. This now became the issue around which Anglo–Polish relations revolved, becoming the main rationale of Polish–British relations, and increasingly so as the war progressed.

Appendix 1

At the meeting in the Secretary of State's room on the evening of 6 April the following confidential summary of the conclusions of the conversations was drawn up and approved by the Secretary of State and M. Beck. The text was checked and initialled as correct by the Polish Ambassador and Sir A. Cadogan on the following day.

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

1 As a result of the conversations held in London on the 4th–6th April 1939, between the Polish Foreign Minister on the one side and the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs on the other, the Polish Government and His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom record the following conclusions:

2 The Polish Government and His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom have decided to place their collaboration on a permanent basis by the exchange of reciprocal assurances of assistance. They are accordingly prepared to enter into a formal agreement on the following basis:

- (a) If Germany attacks Poland His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom will at once come to the help of Poland.
- (b) If Germany attempts to undermine the independence of Poland by processes of economic penetration or in any other way, His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom will support Poland in resistance to such attempts. If Germany then attacks Poland, the provisions of paragraph (a) above will apply. In the event of other action by Germany which clearly threatened Polish independence, and was of such a nature that the Polish Government considered it vital to resist it with their national forces, His Majesty's Government would at once come to the help of Poland.
- (c) Reciprocally, Poland gives corresponding assurances to the United Kingdom.
- (d) It is understood that the Polish Government and His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom will keep each other fully and promptly informed of any developments threatening the independence of either country.

3 As an earnest of their intention to enter into a formal agreement to render assistance to Poland in the circumstances contemplated above, His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom have informed the Polish Government, and have stated publicly, that during the period required for the conclusion of the formal agreement outlined in paragraph 2 above, in the event of any action which clearly threatened Polish independence, and which the Polish Government accordingly considered it vital to resist with their national forces, His Majesty's Government would feel themselves bound at once to lend the Polish Government all the support in their power.

4 The Polish Government, for their part, give His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom a reciprocal undertaking to the same effect, which is, in the same way as the undertaking given by His Majesty's Government, already in force and will remain in force during the period required for the conclusion of the formal agreement outlined in paragraph 2 above.

II

5 The following points remain to be settled before the formal agreement can be concluded:

- (a) His Majesty's Government desire that the formal agreement should provide that if the United Kingdom and France went to war with Germany to resist German aggression in Western Europe (the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, Denmark), Poland would come to their help. (M. Beck appreciated the vital importance of this question for the United Kingdom, and undertook that the Polish Government would take it into serious consideration).
- (b) The obligations which His Majesty's Government have accepted towards Poland during the period necessary for the conclusion of the formal agreement have also been accepted by France. It is understood that the obligations to be accepted by His Majesty's Government in the formal agreement itself should also be accepted by France; the method of arranging this would be a matter for discussion with the French Government.

III

6 His Majesty's Government wished it to be part of the formal agreement that Poland should come to the help of Rumania if the latter were the State threatened. The Polish Government, while respecting to the full the obligations of mutual assistance which exist between Poland and Rumania, thought it premature to express a definite opinion as to the desirability of including the case of Rumania in the formal agreement. They consider that they should treat the matter in the first instance direct with the Rumanian and Hungarian Governments. They will, in the meanwhile, immediately consult with His Majesty's Government should developments in relation to Rumania or Hungary render this desirable.

IV

7 It is understood between the Polish Government and His Majesty's

Government that the conclusions recorded above do not preclude either Government from making further agreements with other countries for the purpose of safeguarding their own independence or that of other States.

8 It is the intention of His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom for their part:

- (a) To continue the exchanges of views which they have already initiated with the Rumanian Government, with the object of developing collaboration between the United Kingdom, Rumania and other Powers, for the purposes set forth above.
- (b) To initiate exchanges of views for a similar purpose with the Governments of other members of the Balkan Entente.

9 His Majesty's Government, while realising the difficulties standing in the way of associating the Soviet Government with the action such as is contemplated above, are further persuaded of the importance of maintaining the best possible relations with the Soviet government, whose position in the matter could not be disregarded.

10 The Polish Government for their part declare that, should His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom assume further obligations in Eastern Europe, these obligations would in no way extend the obligations undertaken by Poland.

11 The Polish Government emphasise the importance, in the consideration of any attempt to develop collaboration, of taking into account the position of the Eastern Baltic States.

Appendix 2

POLISH DRAFT PROPOSALS

His Majesty the King of the United Kingdom, of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the British Overseas Territories, Emperor of India, and the President of the Republic of Poland.

Desiring equally to maintain peace and develop the best relations with all other states, and concerned to ensure the security and wellbeing of their countries by mutually guaranteeing help and assistance against all externally directed actions against their independence, have decided to conclude a compact with a view to these aims, and have appointed their plenipotentiaries:

Article I

In case of action by a European Power that threatens the vital interests of one of the High Contracting Parties, and as soon as this High party will have resisted with its armed forces, the other High Party will immediately supply to the threatened High Party all the aid and assistance which will be in its power to give.

Article II

It is understood that the engagement laid down in the first article of the present Accord applies in the event of any action whatsoever of a European Power which openly threatens, directly or indirectly the independence of one or other of the High Contracting Parties.

Article III

If a European Power makes attempts to undermine the independence of Poland or the United Kingdom by the conduct of economic penetration or whatever means, the High Contracting Parties will lend mutual support in their resistance to such attempts. If that power then opens hostilities against Poland or the United Kingdom, the arrangements of the first article will apply.

Article IV

Without prejudice to the commitment of the High Contracting Powers

stated above to supply immediate mutual aid and assistance on the opening of hostilities, the High Contracting Powers will exchange complete and up to the minute information on all events which may tend to create a situation in which the commitments stipulated in the present accord will apply.

Article V

The High Contracting Parties will communicate to each other the text of the guarantee of assistance against aggression which they have contracted.

In the event of one of the High Contracting Parties intending to agree to a new guarantee of this kind after the coming into force of this Accord, it will follow that in the interests of the proper functioning of this Accord, the other High Contracting Party shall be informed of it.

Article VI

If the High Contracting Parties find themselves engaged in hostilities as a result of the application of the present accord, they will not proceed to negotiate or conclude an armistice or peace treaty without common agreement.

Article VII

The present Agreement is concluded for the duration of five years. If it is not abrogated six months before the expiring of the stated period, it will be tacitly renewed for a new period of five years, and likewise for following terms.

POLISH DRAFT PROPOSAL FOR A SECRET PROTOCOL

The Polish Government and the Government of His Majesty the King of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland agree to consider the following interpretation of the Defence Agreement signed this day, as the only authentic one, and obligatory on the two High Parties.

- 1 By definition 'a European power' (is meant) Germany.
- 2 The two Governments will establish from time to time, by common agreement, the hypothetical causes of threatening action by Germany which will fall within the terms of article 2 of the said Agreement.
- 3 For a period to come, the two Governments agree to consider as action, as understood by article 2 of the Agreement all German action which provokes the armed resistance of one of the High Contracting Parties and which is directed (a) against the existence of Danzig as a Free City independent of Germany and against the rights of Poland therein, (b) against the integrity or independence of the following countries: Belgium, Denmark, Holland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in so far as the states in question defend themselves and request assistance from one of the High Contracting Parties.

The way in which mutual assistance will be given in the circumstances envisaged by this Defence Agreement and the present protocol, shall be

established by negotiations between the competent military, naval and air force authorities of the Contracting Powers.

- 4 In the event of an action as defined by the first or second articles of the Defence Agreement, on the part of a European Power other than Germany, then the High Contracting Powers undertake to plan together the measures to be taken jointly.
- 5 The two Governments shall not by signing this Agreement give up their freedom to negotiate with other countries, with a view to guaranteeing the independence of their own countries or those countries with whom they negotiate. Meanwhile, any new commitments which they may undertake shall neither restrict their mutual obligations defined by the Present Agreement, nor create indirectly new obligations between the High Party which shall not be a party to those new agreements, and the third state participating in those agreements.

If the engagements outlined above are entered into by one of the High Contracting Parties with a third country, then those commitments, shall not impair the sovereignty or territorial inviolability of the other High Contracting Party.

Appendix 3

BRITISH DRAFT PROPOSALS

The Governments of the United Kingdom, and Poland, desiring to place on a permanent basis the collaboration resulting from the assurances of assistance, of an exclusively defensive character, which they have exchanged, and thereby to give effect, in their capacity as Members of the League of Nations, to the principle of mutual support against aggression which is embodied in the Covenant of the League. Have agreed upon the following provisions.

Article I

Should the United Kingdom or Poland become engaged in hostilities with a European Power (not being a Power to which the other party had given an assurance of assistance against aggression), in consequence of either (1) aggression by that Power against the United Kingdom, or (2) aggression by that Power against another European State which both the United Kingdom and Poland had undertaken to assist against such aggression, Poland or the United Kingdom, as the case may be, will immediately give the other party all the support and assistance in its power.

Article II

The provisions of Article I will also apply in the event of any action by a European Power (not being a Power to which the other party had given an assurance of assistance against aggression) which clearly threatened, directly or indirectly, the independence of Poland or the United Kingdom, and was of such a nature that the party concerned considered it vital to resist it with its national forces.

Article III

Should a European Power (not being a Power to which the other party has given an assurance of assistance against aggression) attempt to undermine the independence of Poland or the United Kingdom by processes of economic penetration or in any other way, the United Kingdom and Poland will support each other in resistance to such attempts. Should the European Power concerned thereupon embark on hostilities against Poland or the United Kingdom, the provisions of Article I of the present agreement will apply.

Article IV

Should the United Kingdom become engaged in hostilities with a European Power (not being a Power to which Poland had given an assurance of assistance against aggression), in consequence of action by that Power which threatened the independence or neutrality of another European State in such a way as to constitute a menace to the security of the United Kingdom, Poland will at once give the United Kingdom all the support and assistance in its power.

Article V

The support and assistance provided for in preceding Articles, which is without prejudice to the rights and position of other Powers, will be given in accordance with the principles of Article 16 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, but without its being necessary to await action by the League.

Article VI

Without prejudice to the immediate rendering of assistance on the outbreak of hostilities in accordance with the preceding Articles, in the event of circumstances arising which threatened to call into operation the undertakings of mutual assistance provided for above, the contracting Governments will immediately consult together upon the situation.

They will, moreover, keep each other fully and promptly informed of any developments directly or indirectly threatening the independence of either country.

Article VII

The contracting Governments will communicate to each other the terms of any undertakings of assistance against aggression referred to above, which they have already given. Should either of them in future be considering the giving of such an undertaking, it will consult the other party before doing so, and will communicate to it the terms of any undertaking so given.

Article VIII

This agreement does not preclude either party from making arrangements with other countries, in conformity with the principles of the Covenant of the League of Nations, having as their object the maintenance of peace or the safeguarding of their own independence or that of other States.

Article IX

This agreement will continue for a period of (5) years from today's date. Not less than (6) months before the expiry of the said period, the contracting Governments will consult together as to the desirability of renewing it, with or without modification.

Appendix 4

AGREEMENT OF MUTUAL ASSISTANCE BETWEEN THE UNITED KINGDOM AND POLAND

The Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Polish Government:

Desiring to place on a permanent basis the collaboration between their respective countries resulting from the assurance of mutual assistance of a defensive character which they have already exchanged;

Have resolved to conclude an Agreement for that purpose and have appointed as their Plenipotentiaries:

The Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland:

The Rt. Hon. Viscount Halifax, K.G., G.C.S.I., Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs:

The Polish Government:

His Excellency Count Edward Raczyński, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Polish Republic in London:

Who, having exchanged their Full Powers, found in good and due form, have agreed on the following provisions:

Article 1

Should one of the Contracting Parties become engaged in hostilities with a European Power in consequence of aggression by the latter against that Contracting Party, the other Contracting Party will at once give the Contracting Party engaged in hostilities all the support and assistance in its power.

Article 2

(1) The provisions of Article I will also apply in the event of any action by a European Power which clearly threatened, directly or indirectly, the independence of one of the Contracting Parties, and was of such a nature that the Party in question considered it vital to resist it with its armed forces.

(2) Should one of the Contracting Parties become engaged in hostilities with a European Power in consequence of action by that Power which threatened

the independence or neutrality, of another European State in such a way as to constitute a clear menace to the security of that Contracting Party, the provisions of Article 1 will apply, without prejudice, however, to the rights of the other European State concerned.

Article 3

Should a European Power attempt to undermine the independence of one of the Contracting Parties by processes of economic penetration or in any other way, the Contracting Parties will support each other in resistance to such attempts. Should the European Power concerned thereupon embark on hostilities against one of the Contracting Parties, the provisions of Article 1 will apply.

Article 4

The methods of applying the undertakings of mutual assistance provided for by the present Agreement are established between the competent naval, military and air authorities of the Contracting Parties.

Article 5

Without prejudice to the foregoing undertakings of the Contracting Parties to give each other mutual support and assistance immediately on the outbreak of hostilities, they will exchange complete and speedy information concerning any development which might threaten their independence and, in particular, concerning any development which threatened to call the said undertakings into operation.

Article 6

(1) The Contracting Parties will communicate to each other the terms of any undertakings of assistance against aggression which they have already given or may in future give to other States.

(2) Should either of the Contracting Parties intend to give such an undertaking after the coming into force of the present Agreement, the other contracting Party shall, in order to ensure the proper functioning of the Agreement, be informed thereof.

(3) Any new undertaking which the contracting Parties may enter into in future shall neither limit their obligations under the present Agreement nor indirectly create new obligations between the Contracting Parties not participating in these undertakings and the third State concerned.

Article 7

Should the Contracting Parties be engaged in hostilities in consequence of the application of the present Agreement, they will not conclude an armistice or treaty of peace except by mutual agreement.

Article 8

(1) The present Agreement shall remain in force for a period of five years,

(2) Unless renounced six months before the expiry of this period it shall

continue in force, each Contracting Party having thereafter the right to renounce it at any time by giving six months' notice to that effect.

(3) The present Agreement shall come into force on signature.

In faith whereof the above-named Plenipotentiaries have signed the present Agreement and have affixed thereto their seals.

Done in English in duplicate, at London, the 25th August, 1939. A Polish text shall subsequently be agreed upon between the Contracting Parties and both texts will then be authentic.

SECRET PROTOCOL ATTACHED TO THE AGREEMENT OF
MUTUAL ASSISTANCE BETWEEN THE UNITED KINGDOM AND
POLAND SIGNED ON THE 25TH AUGUST, 1939

The Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Polish Government are agreed upon the following interpretation of the Agreement of Mutual Assistance signed this day as alone authentic and binding.

1 (a) By the expression 'a European power' employed in the Agreement is to be understood Germany.

(b) In the event of action within the meaning of Articles 1 or 2 of the Agreement by a European Power other than Germany, the Contracting Parties will consult together on the measures to be taken in common.

2 (a) The two Governments will from time to time determine by mutual agreement the hypothetical cases of action by Germany coming within the ambit of Article 2 of the Agreement.

(b) Until such time as the two Governments have agreed to modify the following provisions of this paragraph, they will consider: that the case contemplated by paragraph (1) of Article 2 of the Agreement is that of the Free City of Danzig; and that the cases contemplated by paragraph (2) of Article 2 are Belgium, Holland, Lithuania.

(c) Latvia and Estonia shall be regarded by the two Governments as included in the list of countries contemplated by paragraph (2) of Article 2 from the moment that an undertaking of mutual assistance between the United Kingdom and a third State covering those two countries enters into force.

(d) As regards Rumania, the Government of the United Kingdom refers to the guarantee which it has given to that country; and the Polish Government refers to the reciprocal undertakings of the Rumano-Polish alliance which Poland has never regarded as incompatible with her traditional friendship for Hungary.

3 The undertakings mentioned in Article 6 of the Agreement should they be entered into by one of the Contracting Parties with a third State, would of necessity be so framed that their execution should at no time prejudice either the sovereignty or territorial inviolability of the other contracting Party.

4 The present protocol constitutes an integral part of the Agreement signed this day, the scope of which it does not exceed.

In faith whereof the undersigned, being duly authorised, have signed the present Protocol.

Done in English in duplicate, at London, the 25th August, 1939. A Polish text will subsequently be agreed upon between the Contracting Parties and both texts will then be authentic.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

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- 58 PRO CAB 53/53. COS 961. 22 August 1939.
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5 THE FINANCING OF THE EASTERN FRONT

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- 10 PRO FO 371. 23144. C6996/1110/55. 5 May 1939.
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- 13 PRO FO 371. 23144. C6996/1110/55. 8 May 1939.
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- 16 PRO FO 371. 23140. C7660/521/55. 24 May 1939.
- 17 PRO FO 371. 23140. C7924/521/55. 30 May 1939.

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- 21 *Ibid.*, 28 June 1939, pp. 579–81.
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- 23 PISM A.11. 49/B/3. 10 May 1939.
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- 27 PISM A.11. 6/WB/3. 20 May 1939.
- 28 PISM A.11. 49/WB/3. 26 May 1939.
- 29 PRO CAB 55/7. J.P. 436. 13 June 1939.
- 30 PRO CAB 2/8. CID. 363 Mtg. 20 April 1939.
- 31 PRO CAB 16/219. A.D.4. 20 June 1939.
- 32 PRO CAB 53/7. COS. 113. 20 June 1939.
- 33 PRO CAB 16/219. A.D.2. 20 June 1939.
- 34 PRO CAB 16/219. 1 Mtg. 21 June 1939.
- 35 PRO CAB 16/219. A.D.11. DCOS. 108. 24 June 1939.
- 36 PRO CAB 16/219. A.D.15. Annex. 30 June 1939.
- 37 PRO CAB 16/219. A.D.15. 26 June 1939.
- 38 PRO CAB 16/219. A.D.12. 28 June 1939.
- 39 PRO CAB 16/219. A.D.17. 28 June 1939.
- 40 PRO CAB 16/219. A.D.17. 28 June 1939.
- 41 PRO FO 371. 23145. C9290/1110/55. 4 July 1939.
- 42 PRO FO 371. 23129. C8003/27/55. 3 June 1939.
- 43 PRO FO 371. 23129. C8047/27/55. 5 June 1939.
- 44 PRO FO 371. 23129. C8383/27/55. 8 June 1939.
- 45 PISM Lot. A.I. 2/15. 14 June 1939.
- 46 PRO CAB 16/219. A.D.15. 26 June 1939 CAB 54/7. DCOS 108. 24 June 1939.
- 47 PISM Lot. Av. 1/40. i.I. 1 July 1939.
- 48 PISM Lot. A.I. 2/15. 30 June 1939.
- 49 PISM Lot. Av. 1/40. i.I. 18 August 1939.
- 50 PRO CAB 16/219. A.D.38. DCOS. 110. 5 July 1939.
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France, Egypt, Turkey, Portugal, Holland, Greece, Belgium, Iraq, Poland, Bulgaria, Rumania, Yugoslavia, Saudi Arabia.
 - List B.* For land and anti-air armaments
France, Egypt, Turkey, Belgium, Poland, Portugal, Bulgaria, Holland, Iraq, Greece, Rumania, Yugoslavia, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Hungary.
 - List C.* For air armaments
France, Egypt, Turkey, Poland, Holland, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Portugal, Iraq, Greece, Rumania, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Belgium, Hungary.

- 52 PRO FO 371. C7007/1110/55. 20 May 1939, DBFP. (ser. iii). Vol. V. No. 562. pp. 604–605.
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- 54 PRO FO 371. 23145. C8345/1110/55. 10 June 1939.
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- 56 PRO FO 371. 23145. C8345/1110/55. 10 July 1939.
- 57 PRO FO 371. 23145. C9244/1110/55. 30 June 1939.
- 58 PRO FO 371. C9297/1110/55. 3 July 1939. DBFP. (ser. iii) Vol. VI No. 222. pp. 244–6.
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- 60 PRO FO 371. 23143. C9826/624/55. 13 July 1939.
- 61 PRO FO 371. 23146. C10029/1110/55. 12 July 1939.
- 62 PRO T.160. 16073/2. 13 July 1939.
- 63 PRO FO 371. 23146. C9956/1110/55. 15 July 1939.
- 64 PISM A.12. 53/24. No. 177. 16 July 1939.
- 65 PISM A.12. 53/29. 22 July 1939.
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- 71 PISM A.12. 53/24. No. 188. 24 July 1939.
- 72 PISM A.12. 53/24. No. 185. 24 July 1939.
- 73 Zarański (ed.), *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka*, 21 July 1939, p. 679.
- 74 PRO FO 371. 23148. C11658/1177/55. 19 August 1939.
- 75 PRO T.160. F.16073/3. 1 September 1939.
- 76 PRO FO 371. 23147. C13082/1110/55. 7 September 1939.

6 THE SOVIET UNION: THE REJECTED PARTNER

- 1 The British side of the negotiations has been analysed by Sidney Aster in 1939; *The Making of the Second World War* and by Ian Colvin in *The Chamberlain Cabinet*. The French side has been analysed by A. Adamthwaite in his book, *France and the Coming of the Second World War*, and by Robert Young in, *In Command of France. French Foreign Policy and Military Planning 1933–1939*. A recently published book by Jonathan Haslam, *The Soviet Union and the Struggle for collective Security in Europe 1933–1939* (Macmillan in association with the Centre for Russian and East European Studies, University of Birmingham, London, 1984) pp. 217–32, deals with the Soviet side of the negotiations.
- 2 Adamthwaite, *France and the Coming of the Second World War*, pp. 308–9.
- 3 Young, *In Command of France*, pp. 232–5.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 237–40.
- 5 PRO FO 371. C5460/15/18. 18 April 1939 also DBFP (ser. iii), Vol. V. No. 201. pp. 228–9.
- 6 PRO CAB 23/98. Cabinet 21/39. 19 April 1939.

- 7 PRO CAB 23/99. Cabinet 24/39. 26 April 1939.
- 8 PRO CAB 24/286. C.P. 116(39) enclosing F.P.(36). 47 Mtg. 16 May 1939.
- 9 PRO CAB 24/286. C.P. 115(39). 19 May 1939.
- 10 PRO CAB 23/99. Cabinet 30/39. 24 May 1939.
- 11 NC 18/1/1100. 21 May 1939.
- 12 NC 18/1/1101. 28 May 1939.
- 13 PRO CAB 27/625. F.P.(36). 56 Mtg. 4 July 1939.
- 14 PRO CAB 27/625. F.P.(36). 57 Mtg. 10 July 1939.
- 15 PRO CAB 23/100. Cabinet 38/39. 19 July 1939.
- 16 PRO CAB 23/100. Cabinet 39/39. 26 July 1939.
- 17 PRO CAB 53/10. C.O.S. 283 Mtg. 18 March 1939.
- 18 PRO CAB 53/47. C.O.S. 872. 3 April 1939.
- 19 PRO CAB 53/48. C.O.S. 887. 24 April 1939.
- 20 PRO CAB 53/49. C.O.S. 902. 10 May 1939.
- 21 PRO CAB 24/286. C.P.116(39). enclosing F.P. (36)47 Mtg. 16 May 1939.
- 22 PRO CAB 29/160. A.F.C.(J)56. 4 May 1939.
- 23 PRO CAB 54/10. D.C.O.S. 154. 31 July 1939.
- 24 PRO CAB 2/9. C.I.D. 372. 2 August 1939.
- 25 PRO CAB 54/11. D.C.O.S. 179. 16 August 1939.
- 26 PRO FO 371. C10460/3356/18. 21 July 1939 also DBFP (ser. iii) Vol. VI. No. 394. pp. 439–41.
- 27 PRO FO 371. C10814/27/55. 2 August 1939 also DBFP (ser.iii) Vol. VI. P. 564.
- 28 PISM A.12. 53/25. 2 August 1939.
- 29 S. Brzeczczynski, 'W Moskwie przed 20 laty', *Goniec Karpacki*, Nr. 2/3. 1959.
- 30 PRO FO 371. C11580/3356/18. 18 August 1939. also DBFP. (ser. iii) Vol. VII. pp. 53–4.
- 31 PRO FO 371. 23073. C11584/3356/18. 19 August 1939.
- 32 Zarański, *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka*, 22 August 1939. pp. 689–90.
- 33 PISM A.12. 53/29. 23 August 1939.

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- 1 PRO CAB 23/100. Cabinet 39(39). 26 July 1939.
- 2 PRO CAB 23/100. Cabinet 40(39). 2 August 1939.
- 3 Zarański (ed.), *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka*, 18 August 1939, pp. 688–9.
- 4 PISM A.12. 53/25. 1 August 1939.
- 5 PRO FO 371. C10957/57/18. 5 August 1939. DBFP. (ser. iii). Vol. VI. No. 565. pp. 612–13.
- 6 PRO FO 371. C11193/54/18. 10 August 1939. DBFP. (ser. iii) Vol. VI. No. 607. pp. 645–6.
- 7 PISM A.12. 53/25. 2 August 1939.
- 8 PRO FO 371. C10814/27/55. 2 August 1939. DBFP. (ser. iii). Vol. VI. No. 610. pp. 649–50.

- 9 PRO FO 371. 23025. C11185/54/18. 10 August 1938.
- 10 PRO FO 371. 23025. C11185/54/18. 10 August 1939.
- 11 PRO FO 371. 23025. C11185/54/18. 10 August 1939.
- 12 PRO FO 371. 23025. C11266/54/18. 15 August 1939.
- 13 PRO FO 371. 23026. C11468/54/18. 17 August 1939.
- 14 PRO FO 371. 23026. C11563/54/18. 18 August 1939. DBFP. (ser. iii).
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- 15 PRO FO 371. 22991. C11182/16/18. 10 August 1939.
- 16 PRO FO 371. 23026. C11593/54/18. 19 August 1939.
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